THE RIGHT TO RULE

AND

THE FACT OF CREATION

By Shamsaddin Amanov

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A Jurisdictional Inquiry into Divine Authority, Consent, and the Moral Standing of Persons

Shamsaddin Amanov

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Abstract

This work argues that the central philosophical question regarding God is not, in the first instance, whether God exists, but whether any creator thereby acquires legitimate moral authority over the persons created. It is a normative inquiry of the same kind that political modernity learned to direct at earthly sovereigns: by what right does one will claim jurisdiction over another?

The argument proceeds by a jurisdictional shift: it moves the debate from ontology to legitimacy, from power to right, and from metaphysical authorship to the standards by which authority is justified. Legitimacy and existence are analytically distinct — a demonstrated deity would still face the authority question. The essay therefore brackets divine existence and asks what follows normatively if a creator is granted for the sake of argument, finding that creative power, ontological superiority, and even perfect goodness do not, without further argument, establish the right to command rational agents.

Across six parts, the essay develops a framework for auditing divine rule through the concepts of consent, notice, proportionality, exposure, competence, accountability, and communicative fairness — standards that arise from the structure of rational agency itself, not from secular political philosophy imported arbitrarily.

The work defends the claim that creation is not ownership; that birth cannot function as tacit consent; that hiddenness and interpretive opacity undermine fair moral judgment where ultimate stakes are involved; and that suffering, mortality, and natural vulnerability raise serious problems for any model of perfectly legitimate governance. The combination of non-consensual existence, inescapable dependence, contested revelation, and disproportionate sanction creates a cumulative legitimacy deficit no single theological reply has yet discharged.

The work then addresses the strongest theological replies — especially Thomistic and non-voluntarist conceptions — before turning to constructive questions: whether ethics requires divine legislation, how public reason should treat theological claims, and how meaning, ritual, and the non-political sacred may be re-understood without unchosen sovereignty. The engagement with Thomism receives sustained treatment because it represents the most serious attempt to dissolve the authority question — a move that either surrenders the political grammar of command and judgment, or fails to escape it, in which case the legitimacy standards return with full force.

The result is a disciplined account of philosophical adulthood, not a denial of transcendence nor a celebration of rebellion.

If there is a creator, that fact may warrant wonder, gratitude, or reverence; it does not by itself establish jurisdiction over conscience. The proper posture of finite persons is therefore not automatic obedience, but serious, fair, and unflinching moral audit.

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Part I. The Unasked Question

This opening movement establishes the central claim of the book: that the deepest issue in political theology is not whether a creator exists, but whether any creator thereby acquires the right to rule. It situates the work historically, clarifies its method, and names the jurisdictional shift that organizes everything that follows.

1. The Question Beneath the Question

Philosophy of religion has long been organized around a majestic and difficult question: Does God exist? Generations of thinkers have refined arguments for and against the divine, moving through cosmological inference, teleology, contingency, consciousness, miracles, revelation, evil, hiddenness, and the grammar of religious experience. The question is ancient and serious. It deserves the labor it has received. Yet the durability of a question can also conceal the absence of another. Under the ontological question lies a political one, quieter but no less fundamental: even if God exists, by what right would God rule?

That question is neither rhetorical nor reducible to emotion. It asks for the standards by which any claim of authority becomes legitimate rather than merely effective. In ordinary political life we distinguish between power and right, between force and law, between the ability to command and the entitlement to be obeyed. A state can coerce without being justified. A parent can protect without owning. An institution can endure for centuries and remain illegitimate. Legitimacy is not a by-product of strength. It is a normative achievement.

The peculiar feature of religious discourse is that this distinction is often suspended at precisely the point where it should become sharpest. Human rulers are audited; divine rulers are often presumed. Political modernity taught humanity to distrust inherited sovereignty. We demanded reasons from kings, constitutions from states, limits on coercion, procedures of accountability, rights of exit, and defenses against arbitrary rule. Yet in the theological register, power often reappears clothed in sanctity and therefore exempted from the very scrutiny modernity elsewhere made indispensable. The result is a striking asymmetry: the more comprehensive the authority claim, the less frequently its legitimacy is examined.

This essay proposes that the asymmetry is a philosophical error. Divine authority claims should be evaluated by standards at least as stringent as those applied to human authorities, because the stakes are higher, not lower. If a being claims jurisdiction not over one territory but over all reality, not for one generation but for all persons, not over external conduct alone but over conscience, identity, worship, hope, and fear, then the need for justification deepens. The claim cannot be insulated by grandeur. To the contrary: the larger the claim, the more exacting the audit.

The core thesis, then, is straightforward. The fact of creation does not inherently generate the right to rule. Creative power may explain origin; it does not automatically establish jurisdiction. Ontological superiority may establish asymmetry; it does not by itself establish moral authority. Dependence may create prudential reasons; it does not yet produce obligations of obedience. To move from "you were made by X" to "therefore X has the right to command you" requires an additional argument. Much of theology assumes that argument has already succeeded. This essay asks whether it has.

The inquiry is not reducible to disbelief. One may reject divine jurisdiction while remaining agnostic about divine existence. One may even grant, for the sake of argument, that some creator exists, that this creator is extraordinarily powerful, intelligent, and causally primary, and still ask whether such a being has legitimate authority over rational agents. This separation between existence and legitimacy is methodologically decisive. It frees the argument from dependence on the success or failure of natural theology. Even a demonstrated deity would still face the question of right. Reality and legitimacy are not the same category.

The essay also aims to avoid a familiar distortion. The refusal of illegitimate authority is often interpreted as mere ressentiment, adolescent defiance, or disguised self-worship. But philosophical refusal need not arise from vanity or hatred. It can arise from the same moral seriousness that makes any authority answerable to those over whom it claims power. There is a difference between saying "I dislike this ruler" and saying "this ruler has not justified the right to rule." The first is psychological; the second is juridical. This essay speaks in the second register.

Its tone, accordingly, is deliberately restrained. It does not seek to mock belief or dramatize unbelief. It does not assume that religious traditions are intellectually shallow, nor that secularity is automatically virtuous. It treats classical theism at its strongest and takes seriously the depth of human religious need: the longing for meaning, order, justice, forgiveness, and ultimate intelligibility. But needs do not settle questions of legitimacy. The desire for a just sovereign does not prove that sovereignty is just. The emotional intelligibility of obedience does not establish its moral warrant.

What follows is therefore an exercise in political theology in the literal sense: not theology used to sanctify politics, but political philosophy applied to theological claims of rule. The wager is that once this transfer is made carefully, many assumptions that appeared natural begin to look unstable. Creation no longer reads as ownership. Worship no longer looks like an automatic duty. Hiddenness becomes not merely a metaphysical puzzle but an administrative defect. Hell becomes not only a doctrinal problem but a proportionality problem. Revelation becomes a question of legislative clarity. Obedience becomes something that must be justified, not simply demanded.

The larger aspiration is not destruction but clarity. If divine authority is legitimate, it should be able to survive scrutiny. If it is not, then the refusal to submit is not impiety but intellectual honesty. Either way, the right question is not silenced by awe. It begins there.

2. Genealogy: From Metaphysical Protest to Jurisdictional Critique

For a long time the rebellion against divine authority was staged in the wrong theatre. It appeared as anger at fate, pain before the silence of heaven, resentment toward suffering, or moral disgust at particular doctrines. Those responses were not trivial. They were often morally lucid. Yet they tended to remain reactive. They told us what was intolerable, but not always what exact standard had been violated. The result was that protest could be dismissed as wounded temperament, as spiritual immaturity, or as the inability of finite creatures to endure mystery. A philosophy that wishes to endure criticism needs a stronger footing than indignation alone. It needs a method that shows where the fault line lies.

The history of modern thought contains the scattered pieces of such a method. Social contract theory desacralized political power by asking not merely who possesses force, but what makes rule legitimate. Liberal constitutionalism learned to distinguish office from right, capacity from permission, and historical authorship from continuing consent. Democratic theory insisted that those subject to binding norms are not raw material but participants. Existential philosophy deepened the picture by showing that human beings do not merely occupy institutions; they interpret, resist, endorse, and judge them. What Omittoism does is gather those pieces and apply them where they have too rarely been applied: to the highest claimed authority of all.

This move is easy to misunderstand. It is not a childish attempt to put God on trial as though one were summoning a local magistrate. Nor is it a theatrical inversion in which the finite pretends to tower over the infinite. The point is more exact. Whenever a relation is described in normative terms—command, obedience, punishment, guilt, duty, worship, rebellion, justice—juridical language has already entered the room. One cannot meaningfully say that creatures ought to obey, deserve punishment, are guilty of disobedience, or owe worship, and then prohibit evaluative scrutiny on the grounds that the ruler is too exalted. Exaltation may alter the case. It cannot abolish the category of legitimacy while continuing to demand its benefits.

Earlier critics saw parts of this. Hume weakened the rational confidence of natural theology and made it harder to infer moral conclusions from a created order marked by suffering. Bradlaugh and the freethought tradition refused inherited pieties and linked religious authority to civil subordination. Later thinkers in political theology examined sovereignty, exception, command, and law in human institutions, often noticing that theological and political concepts mirror one another. Yet even there, the question was often descriptive: how does theology shape politics? The present framework asks a different question: if the structure of authority is mirrored across theology and politics, why should the standards of legitimacy stop at the sky?

This is the genealogical significance of the jurisdictional turn. It does not begin from the assumption that religion is false. It begins from the observation that the most decisive historical moral advances of the modern world involved refusing to confuse power with

right. We learned to ask the king by what right he ruled; the father by what right he commanded; the empire by what right it extracted obedience; the market by what right it shaped lives without accountability. The omission is obvious only after it is named: we did not consistently ask the cosmos by what right it governs. Instead we often treated cosmological priority as a moral exemption.

That exemption depends on a hidden slide. Because God, if real, would be unlike human rulers in degree and perhaps in kind, it is said that political criteria do not apply. But the argument almost never establishes this; it assumes it. It confuses the thought that divine rule cannot be judged by merely local conventions with the much stronger claim that divine rule is beyond judgment altogether. The former is plausible. The latter is precisely what must be argued, and it is the burden of theology, not its starting privilege.

The jurisdictional approach therefore marks a transition from revolt to audit. Revolt can be noble, but it can also be misheard as temperament. Audit is less melodramatic and more durable. It asks for standards, evidence, procedure, competence, consent, proportionality, notice, interpretation, and review. It translates diffuse metaphysical unease into visible normative questions. Are the governed adequately informed? Are the terms clear? Are the sanctions proportionate? Is consent meaningful? Are burdens avoidable? Is exposure non-arbitrary? Are appeals possible? Are rival interpretations adjudicated fairly? Does the system cultivate agency or dependence? A framework that cannot even survive the asking of these questions has already conceded more than it realizes.

This genealogy also clarifies the originality of the present work. Its novelty does not lie in denying God, in restating the problem of evil, or in repeating familiar secular arguments against revelation. Its novelty lies in recoding the terrain. The central issue is not existence but jurisdiction; not power but legitimacy; not whether there is a creator but whether creation itself yields the right to rule. Once framed that way, entire constellations of older arguments rearrange themselves. Hiddenness becomes not only a spiritual puzzle but an administrative failure. Hell becomes not only a metaphysical horror but a problem of punitive proportionality. Worship becomes not simply devotion but a question of whether asymmetrical dependence corrupts voluntary allegiance. Even salvation changes aspect: it becomes the offer of rescue within a system whose authority is under audit.

A final historical point matters. The move from sacred authority to accountable authority was never merely institutional. It transformed moral psychology. People ceased to see themselves only as subjects and began to see themselves as co-legislators, bearers of rights, and judges of institutions. Omittoism extends that maturation into the theological domain. It asks what philosophy looks like when humanity no longer imagines itself as permanent moral childhood before the universe. The answer is not necessarily atheism. It is adulthood under conditions of uncertainty: serious enough to ask for reasons, humble enough to revise, and unafraid to say that the oldest throne is still a throne if it claims obedience.

The name *Omittoism* marks the precise omission it corrects: the omission of the authority question from the centre of philosophy of religion. It is not a complete metaphysical system but a methodological priority — a insistence that wherever normative language enters

theological description, the standards attached to normativity follow. The label is deliberately modest because the claim it names is modest: not that transcendence is impossible, not that religion is irrational, but that rule requires justification, and that justification has been omitted for too long.

3. The Literature of Refusal: Predecessors, Protest, and the Limits of Metaphysical Rebellion

The genealogy traced in the preceding chapter moved through political theory and institutional critique: social contract theory, liberal constitutionalism, the desacralization of earthly sovereignty. But there is a parallel tradition — literary and philosophical rather than juridical — that raised the authority question with comparable seriousness and incomparably greater emotional depth. To ignore it would be ungrateful. To accept it without critical distance would be philosophically imprecise. For while this tradition identified the right problem, it tended to express it in the wrong register.

The figures in question span roughly a century: Mikhail Bakunin's God and the State (published posthumously, 1882), the figure of Ivan Karamazov in Dostoevsky's The Brothers Karamazov (1880), and Albert Camus' The Rebel (L'Homme Révolté, 1951). Each in their way refused divine sovereignty not by disproving God but by contesting the right to rule. Each represents a genuine step toward the jurisdictional frame this essay has tried to build. And each falls short of it in a way that the present work must understand and correct.

Mikhail Bakunin's God and the State opens with one of the most politically explicit critiques of divine authority ever written by a serious thinker. God, for Bakunin, is not primarily a metaphysical question but a political one. The existence of a divine master, he argues, necessarily entails the negation of human liberty. The argument is not that God does not exist — Bakunin is more interested in the structure of power than the ontology — but that divine sovereignty is structurally incompatible with the kind of self-determination that constitutes human dignity. The creature who bows before God learns to bow before every delegated earthly power thereafter. Theology is political pedagogy in disguise.

This is a near-anticipation of the jurisdictional turn. Bakunin is asking not whether God exists but what divine existence would imply for the moral standing of persons. His answer is that total, unchosen, and metaphysically guaranteed sovereignty leaves no room for the kind of reflective endorsement that distinguishes subjects from objects. He recognizes, avant la lettre, that authority claiming comprehensive jurisdiction over conscience enters a domain where justification cannot be deferred by an appeal to grandeur. These are real insights, and they are not adequately credited in the secondary literature on atheism, which tends to organize itself around the existence question and thus overlooks those who rejected existence and legitimacy as separate matters.

Yet Bakunin's critique is fatally entangled with its political context in ways that limit its philosophical reach. His attack on divine authority is inseparable from his attack on the whole structure of institutional deference — church, state, capital, and family are bound together as a single oppressive system to be dissolved simultaneously. The result is that divine authority is criticized not primarily on its own terms but as the symbolic apex of a comprehensive political program. God functions in Bakunin less as a philosophical interlocutor than as the ideological crown of everything the revolutionary movement opposes.

This embeds the critique in a totalism that subtly mirrors what it attacks. Because Bakunin's target is not only whether God's authority is legitimate but whether any authority over persons could be, the specific question that matters most — under what conditions, if any, might authority be justified? — tends to dissolve into a general refusal. The jurisdictional framework needs to preserve that question precisely because legitimacy is not impossible in principle but demonstrably unearned in the divine case as currently argued. To declare in advance that no authority over persons could ever be legitimate is to close the inquiry at the moment it becomes interesting. Omittoism is not anarchism applied to heaven. It is the insistence that heaven be held to the same standards of justification already applied, however imperfectly, on earth.

What Bakunin bequeathed is a vocabulary: power against personhood, the political reading of theology, the intuition that sacred and earthly domination reinforce each other. The jurisdictional framework inherits and refines that vocabulary by asking more precisely where the argument must be won.

Dostoevsky's Ivan Karamazov represents something different from Bakunin and in some respects more philosophically serious: a refusal that is not ideological but moral. In the celebrated "Rebellion" chapter of The Brothers Karamazov, Ivan does not argue that God does not exist. He grants, provisionally, that God does. He grants further that there may be a final harmony — a transcendent resolution in which all suffering is justified, all tears dried, all injustice absorbed into some incomprehensible good. His refusal is not directed at this picture as false. It is directed at the terms of entry.

What Ivan cannot accept is that the suffering of innocent children can serve as the raw material for any cosmic arithmetic whatsoever. Not because the final harmony might be false, but because — even if true — he would return the ticket. The argument is not epistemological but ethical: a refusal to endorse the calculus of redemption, the claim that any ultimate outcome could justify the agony of the child weeping in a frozen outhouse for no fault the child could name. One does not, Ivan insists, ransom eternal harmony with the tears of children.

This is genuinely close to the birth problem and the competence problem as developed in Chapters 9 and 15 of the present work. Ivan is asking something structurally identical: by what right does any system impose involuntary suffering on beings who did not author the conditions under which they suffer, and then claim that this suffering is justified by outcomes the sufferers themselves never chose? The move from "this served a higher purpose" to "the suffering was therefore legitimate" is

precisely the inference that Omittoism disputes. Ivan's instincts are right, and they deserve to be said plainly.

Yet Ivan's position remains moral protest rather than juridical analysis. He knows with extraordinary clarity what he cannot accept. He does not specify, systematically, the standard that has been violated. His refusal is expressed through outrage at particular cases — the lacerated girl, the tortured child, the hounds set upon the serf boy — rather than through an architecture of criteria that could be endorsed or contested on its own terms. This means his position is perpetually vulnerable to the response Dostoevsky himself, with fair intellectual honesty, allows the elder Zosima to represent: that Ivan's revolt expresses the suffering of a great mind that cannot yet see past its own pain.

The jurisdictional approach is less aesthetically dramatic than Ivan's revolt but more durable under philosophical pressure. Because it does not rest on emotional conviction alone — on the sheer moral unacceptability of a single case — it cannot be dismissed as the inability of a refined sensibility to endure what a more comprehensive understanding would accommodate. Where Ivan's argument is vulnerable precisely at the point of epistemic humility, the jurisdictional argument already has that concession built into its structure. Skepticism about human perspective cuts both ways; it cannot protect only the positive theological verdict. This was argued in Chapter 15. Ivan saw the conclusion but not the logical path.

Ivan Karamazov matters to this essay not as a position to be surpassed but as a moral witness whose instincts were sound and whose philosophical articulation demanded completion. He kept the question alive through the most powerful literary means available. He demonstrated, against all comfortable theodicy, that the authority question has real moral stakes that cannot be dissolved by metaphysical eloquence. This essay attempts to provide his refusal with the grammar it needed.

Albert Camus' The Rebel (1951) comes closest among the three predecessors to the Omittoist framework, and it does so in a register that is simultaneously historical, philosophical, and existential. Camus begins from metaphysical revolt — the Ivanian refusal to accept a world in which innocent suffering functions as justification for any value — and traces its transformation through the revolutionary history of modernity. His central question is not whether revolt is justified but what happens to revolt when it forgets its own limits.

This is philosophically important because it identifies in advance one of the most serious risks of any critique of sovereignty: that the refusal, once absolutized, reconstitutes exactly what it opposes. Camus saw with extraordinary clarity how the impulse to refuse unjust authority could, when it lost its tension with the values it claimed to defend, produce new absolute authority — the revolutionary terror, the party that replaced the Church, the secular dogma that imitated the sacred one it displaced. The dynamic he named is directly relevant to the present framework. Any critique of divine authority that grounds itself in pure negation rather than in articulable standards risks repeating the structure it contests.

Camus' proposed resolution is the concept of limits. Revolt must remain conscious of its own condition as revolt: it must keep alive the tension between affirmation and negation, must honor the humanity that grounds its refusal without allowing that humanity to harden into a new absolute. The rebel says both yes and no simultaneously — no to the arrangement that humiliates, yes to the value in whose name the humiliation is refused. This double gesture is meant to prevent the refusal from becoming another sovereignty.

This is morally serious. But as a philosophical program it is unstable precisely where stability matters most. "Rebellion" in Camus remains essentially relational and reactive. It requires an oppressor to define itself against. It cannot give positive philosophical form to the values in whose name it refuses without those values immediately raising the question of their own authority. Camus recognized this, and his response — a solidarity forged in shared exile, a Mediterranean humanism rooted in the senses and in the face of the other — is humanly compelling and philosophically underspecified. It does not explain why shared exile generates moral obligation rather than mere companionship in futility.

The jurisdictional framework attempts to solve exactly the problem Camus diagnosed without inheriting its instability. By grounding the critique in specific, articulable standards derived from the structure of rational agency itself — consent, intelligibility, proportionality, accountability — Omittoism has something to say about what would make authority legitimate, not merely about why this particular authority has failed. This is the difference between revolt and audit. Revolt defines itself by what it opposes. Audit is defined by standards that are, in principle, endorsable independently of any particular target. The test can be run on any authority claim, including on secular substitutes for divine sovereignty.

Camus also recognized what this essay calls philosophical orphanhood — the condition of persons who have stepped outside cosmic custody without a guaranteed new home. His response was a stoic solidarity: a shared humanity forged in the recognition of a common absurd condition. This has beauty and honesty. But it lacks the normative architecture that the constructive sections of this essay require. A shared recognition of exposure is a moral beginning, not a foundation. The bio-social contract proposed in Chapter 21 attempts to take what Camus identified — the reality of mutual vulnerability as the field of human seriousness — and explain why it generates reasons for reciprocal care and restraint rather than merely occasions for compassion.

Bakunin gave the political frame: that divine and earthly domination are structurally related and must be contested together. Ivan gave the moral witness: that the suffering of the innocent is not raw material for any calculus of cosmic justification, however sublime. Camus gave the meta-critique: that revolt must know its own limits or repeat what it opposes. Each contribution is real. None is sufficient.

What the tradition as a whole provided is a vocabulary — power against personhood, refusal as dignity, moral protest as philosophical seriousness — that Omittoism inherits and refines. The refinement consists in this: where the tradition expressed what was

intolerable, the present framework specifies what standard has been violated. Where the tradition risked being classified as emotional or temperamental, the framework offers visible criteria that can be inspected, contested, and revised. Where the tradition sometimes tended toward total negation, the framework preserves the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate authority — a distinction that total negation forecloses but that philosophy requires.

The literature of refusal kept the authority question alive through periods when it was not philosophically fashionable and not existentially safe. It demonstrated that the question had real moral stakes that could not be dissolved by metaphysical sophistication. This essay owes it an acknowledgment it has not always received, and attempts to build from it in a form that can survive the philosophical scrutiny it was not always designed to withstand.

4. The Category Question: Why the Divine Can Still Be Audited

One of the earliest objections to the whole enterprise insists that the argument commits a category mistake. Political concepts, it says, belong to human institutions composed of peers, scarcity, coercion, and negotiated order. God, by contrast, is not one agent among others within a common world. If God exists, God is the source of the world, the ground of being, the condition of possibility for all finite agency. To ask such a reality for consent, notice, or proportionality is therefore to drag the transcendent into the courthouse of the contingent. The divine, on this picture, is simply not the kind of thing political evaluation can touch.

This objection deserves to be handled carefully because it identifies a real danger. Not every relation of dependence is political. Gravity has no legitimacy problem because gravity does not issue commands. Biological necessity does not need democratic endorsement because it does not seek inward allegiance. A metaphysical condition can structure existence without becoming a governor. The framework therefore does not say that everything higher, prior, or deeper than the human is automatically subject to juridical standards. It says something narrower: wherever the language of rule, obedience, command, judgment, guilt, punishment, worship, rebellion, or rightful authority is invoked, evaluative scrutiny becomes appropriate.

This distinction is decisive. If theology wishes to describe the divine merely as the sustaining depth of reality, or as the ontological source upon which all beings depend, then many of Omittoism’s political criticisms do not directly apply. One cannot coherently accuse pure being itself of legislative opacity if no legislation is being claimed. But most live theological traditions say far more than this. They describe God as lawgiver, judge, ruler, king, shepherd, lord, commander, rewarder, punisher, redeemer, and claimant over conscience. Once those descriptions enter, the category has shifted. We are no longer discussing bare metaphysical dependency; we are discussing normative authority.

The category objection often survives by moving too quickly between these two layers. When divine authority is asserted, theology speaks personally, morally, and juridically. When that authority is criticized, theology retreats to metaphysical transcendence and says that political criteria are inapplicable. The result is a one-way shield: the divine may enjoy the practical advantages of sovereignty without accepting the evaluative burdens attached to sovereignty. Omittoism calls this maneuver what it is—an equivocation between ontological ultimacy and normative title.

A useful analogy can clarify the point. Imagine a founder who creates an institution, funds it, sustains it, and remains indispensable to its continued existence. The founder's causal and practical importance may be enormous. Yet if the founder also claims the right to command every member without appeal, punish dissent without proportion, and define all obligations unilaterally, the members are entitled to ask whether those additional claims are justified. The founder may respond that the institution would not exist without them. But again, authorship explains origin; it does not automatically settle jurisdiction. The more the members are treated as persons rather than components, the stronger this distinction becomes.

There is also a deeper reason why evaluative language cannot simply be turned off at the threshold of transcendence. Theological traditions themselves routinely appeal to moral predicates in describing God: goodness, justice, mercy, wisdom, faithfulness, love. These are not empty honorifics. They are meant to guide trust, devotion, and obedience. But a predicate like justice acquires its meaning partly through the standards by which actions are distinguishable from their opposites. If nothing recognizable could ever count against divine justice, then calling God just risks collapsing into mere applause. The category objection therefore threatens theology's own meaningfulness if pressed too far.

Some may reply that divine justice is analogical rather than univocal. Certainly. Omittoism does not require that divine and human justice be identical in form. It requires only enough overlap for praise, blame, trust, or obedience to remain intelligible. Analogy cannot function if every concrete concern raised by creatures—notice, arbitrariness, excess, coercion, avoidable harm—can be dismissed as irrelevant in advance. An analogy without any shared evaluative core is not a higher concept. It is a protective fog.

The objection can be restated more charitably. Perhaps the divine is not above evaluation, but evaluation must be adjusted to a reality of incomparable scale. This is reasonable. The framework already allows for asymmetry. Human standards may need translation when applied to a cosmic context. Omittoism is not a demand that God govern like a municipal clerk. What it denies is the stronger claim that asymmetry nullifies accountability altogether. Greater power should increase, not erase, the burden of justification where persons are subjected to immense stakes.

A final point closes the loop. The category objection often imagines critique as arrogance, as though the finite were presumptuously placing itself above the infinite. But the argument does not claim superiority to the divine. It claims only that persons addressed as responsible agents cannot be forbidden from using the very moral faculties that make

responsibility possible. If a theology asks human beings to love the good, distinguish justice from cruelty, respond to reasons, and form conscientious judgment, it cannot then condemn those same faculties when they are turned toward the authority making the demand. That would not preserve reverence. It would punish consistency.

The category question, then, resolves into a conditional thesis. If the divine is described purely in non-juridical terms, much of this book becomes a critique not of God as such but of the political imagery layered onto God. If, however, the divine is described as rightful ruler over conscience, then the audit is not a category error. It is simply philosophy refusing to go silent at the precise point where silence has been most historically rewarded.

5. Method, Scope, and the Jurisdictional Turn

The argument of this essay rests on a methodological shift. Traditional philosophy of religion is organized by what may be called the ontological paradigm. Its central concern is what exists: whether God exists, what kind of being God is, how divine attributes cohere, how God relates to the world, whether evil disconfirms theism, whether hiddenness undermines belief, whether miracles are credible, whether religious experience counts as evidence, and so on. These are important questions, but they are not the only questions one can ask.

The present inquiry adopts instead a jurisdictional paradigm. It asks not first what exists, but what claims to rule are legitimate over rational agents. The shift matters because legitimacy and existence are analytically distinct. The existence of a government does not settle whether it is just. The existence of a parent does not settle the extent of parental authority. The existence of a founder does not settle what rights that founder retains over those whose lives were shaped by the institution founded. Similarly, the existence of a deity would not settle whether that deity possesses legitimate jurisdiction over rational wills.

A jurisdictional approach treats theology, where relevant, as a field of authority claims. Those claims include commands, prohibitions, obligations of worship, duties of trust, requirements of repentance, and structures of reward and punishment. Such claims are political in the broad philosophical sense, not because they concern elections or parliaments, but because they concern rule: who may direct whom, under what conditions, by what right, with what accountability, and with what remedies in the face of abuse or error. Once theology appears under this description, familiar tools from political philosophy become applicable.

The scope of the essay is accordingly limited and explicit. It does not aim to disprove God's existence. It does not attempt a full account of the psychology of religion, the sociology of belief, or the phenomenology of worship. It does not deny that religious traditions can produce ethical insight, aesthetic beauty, communal solidarity, personal transformation, or profound consolation. Nor does it deny that some theists hold highly sophisticated conceptions of God that are not reducible to a supernatural monarch in the sky.

The claim is narrower but still substantial: wherever a theological framework presents God as commanding, judging, rewarding, punishing, demanding allegiance, or claiming rightful obedience, that framework generates a legitimacy question.

This narrower claim allows an important distinction. The essay is concerned with political jurisdiction, not with all moral obligation. To say that God lacks legitimate jurisdiction is not to say that nothing is morally binding. Moral obligations may exist independently of authority. One may have reasons not to lie, exploit, torture, humiliate, betray, or murder without those reasons depending on a divine commander. The argument concerns a specific normative structure: the right of one being to impose obligations on another by commanding as such. That is what political jurisdiction means here. It is the distinction between "this act is wrong" and "you owe obedience to me because I said so."

This distinction is often blurred in theological debate. When critics challenge divine command, they are sometimes heard as denying morality itself. But the two issues are separate. The wrongness of cruelty and the legitimacy of a ruler are not identical matters. A just state may prohibit murder, but murder would not become right if the state vanished. Similarly, if a divine command prohibits murder, the wrongness of murder need not derive from the command. A moral truth may coincide with an order without being created by it. The coincidence does not settle the question of jurisdiction.

The jurisdictional turn also requires standards. If legitimacy is to be evaluated, by what criteria? This essay relies on a family of standards drawn from broadly liberal and contractual political philosophy, though not restricted to any one school. The key ideas are these: first, authority over rational agents must be intelligible to those agents rather than hidden behind opaque appeals to mystery; second, it must be accountable, in the sense that those subject to it can evaluate its justice rather than being forbidden from moral scrutiny; third, it must be proportional, especially in the distribution of sanctions; fourth, it must involve some form of consent, or at minimum conditions that do not make consent meaningless; and fifth, it must preserve the difference between guidance and domination.

These standards are not imported arbitrarily. They arise from the structure of agency itself. Rational beings are not mere objects to be arranged. They interpret, evaluate, endorse, resent, resist, and demand reasons. Any authority claim addressed to such beings therefore enters a normative space in which justification is not optional. The mere fact that a power can impose outcomes does not erase the demand for reasons; it intensifies it. If an authority seeks not only outward compliance but inward allegiance, the demand becomes sharper still.

At this point a likely objection should be addressed. Is the transfer of political categories to the divine illicit? Perhaps divine authority is categorically unlike human authority and therefore not subject to human standards of legitimacy. This objection has force only if divine authority is also unlike authority in the sense that it does not command, judge, reward, punish, or demand obedience. But that concession would transform the issue. If divine "authority" is merely a metaphysical condition like gravity, then it is not political jurisdiction at all. The critique applies precisely where the divine is represented as governor, judge, legislator, or lord. If those categories are invoked to describe God, then the evaluative

categories attached to them cannot be dismissed as inapplicable merely because the ruler is exalted.

A second methodological point concerns epistemic humility. The argument does not claim infallible access to ultimate reality. It proceeds conditionally and publicly. It asks what follows if we take seriously the ordinary standards by which rule is distinguished from domination. It then examines whether common theological claims satisfy those standards. This is not a proof from nowhere. It is an exercise in visible reasoning. Every step is meant to be inspectable. Wherever an assumption enters, it should be stated. Wherever a conclusion exceeds the premises, it should be resisted.

Finally, the jurisdictional turn has a practical consequence. It changes what it means to deliberate about religion. Under the ontological paradigm, everything often depends on whether the evidence for God is sufficient. Under the jurisdictional paradigm, another question becomes central: even if a religious picture were true, would submission be warranted? That question matters to believers and unbelievers alike. It matters to the believer who thinks obedience should be rational rather than inherited. It matters to the doubter who feels that the existence question alone does not capture the moral stakes. And it matters to any reflective person who suspects that the deepest political question—"by what right?"—does not cease at the edge of the sky.

Part II. Persons Before Powers

The second movement begins from the moral standing of persons. It asks what legitimacy requires once we take seriously the conditions of birth, dependency, vulnerability, and the difference between causing a person and owning a person.

6. First Principles: Legitimacy, Consent, and the Moral Standing of Persons

Any critique of authority depends on first principles. If these are vague, the critique becomes rhetoric. If they are overextended, the critique becomes dogma. The present framework rests on three first principles, all of which are familiar in some form within moral and political thought, though here they are brought together for a new purpose.

The first principle is the independence of legitimacy. The capacity to create, produce, sustain, or benefit another being does not inherently generate unlimited moral authority over that being. The truth of this principle is visible across ordinary moral life. Parents generate children but do not own them. Teachers shape students but do not acquire sovereignty over their consciences. States build roads but do not thereby purchase the souls of their citizens. Lovers may transform one another profoundly, yet transformation does not entail rightful

domination. Creative or causal significance may ground responsibilities, dependencies, gratitude, or prudential reasons. It does not by itself ground rule.

Legitimacy should be understood here not as a decorative moral compliment attached after power has already secured obedience, but as the very condition under which obedience can become more than prudence, fear, or habituation. A person may comply with overwhelming force for reasons of survival, gratitude, dependency, or hope, and yet none of these by themselves amount to the recognition of rightful rule. What transforms subjection into obligation is not naked asymmetry but justificatory reciprocity: the governed must be able, at least in principle, to see why the claim laid upon them is one they could acknowledge without ceasing to be ends in themselves. This is why legitimacy stands conceptually between causation and duty. To create, sustain, know better, or benefit another may produce reasons of care, deference, or appreciation, but it does not yet establish the title to command. The standard is not equality of power but equality of moral standing. Even where capacities differ radically, the one who addresses another as a responsible agent implicitly recognizes that agent as the kind of being to whom reasons are owed. A ruler may be wiser, stronger, older, or even ontologically prior, yet if the relation is to remain distinguishable from domination, the governed cannot be reduced to beneficiaries, instruments, or dependents whose perspective is morally optional. Authority becomes legitimate only where power is disciplined by reasons addressed to persons as persons.

The second principle is interactive accountability. Any being that demands a moral response from another thereby places itself within the space of moral evaluation. To ask for obedience, trust, love, worship, sacrifice, or devotion is to enter into a relation answerable to standards. One cannot coherently demand to be loved while declaring oneself exempt from the standards of lovability. One cannot command obedience while declaring that the legitimacy of command is not open to scrutiny. The very act of addressing rational agents as morally responsive beings makes evaluation unavoidable. Authority cannot claim second-person address while refusing second-person accountability.

The third principle is the consent constraint.[1] Legitimate authority over rational agents requires either actual consent, or conditions sufficiently close to voluntary endorsement that consent is not emptied of meaning. This does not mean every moral relation is contractual in a crude sense. It means that where one will claims jurisdiction over another, especially comprehensive jurisdiction, the standing of the governed as rational agents matters. Governance that is total, non-consensual, and inescapable bears a structural resemblance to domination, however benevolent it may claim to be. The less room there is for informed endorsement or meaningful refusal, the heavier the burden of justification becomes.

These first principles presuppose a certain view of persons. Persons here are understood not as isolated atoms floating free of all dependence, but as beings with moral standing because they are capable of suffering, reasoning, valuation, self-direction, and mutual

[1] [1] The most rigorous contemporary treatment of consent as a condition of political legitimacy remains A. John Simmons, *Moral Principles and Political Obligations* (Princeton, 1979). Simmons's own conclusion — that virtually no actual state is legitimate — is more radical than the present argument, which targets divine jurisdiction specifically rather than political authority generally.

recognition. Their dignity does not consist in invulnerability. It consists in the fact that their lives are not mere material for the designs of another. They can be wronged. Their perspectives matter. Their consent is not a ceremonial extra; it is part of what it means to treat them as ends rather than instruments.

This view need not depend on a single controversial metaphysics. A Kantian may ground it in autonomy, a contractualist in justifiability to persons, a humanist in shared vulnerability and reciprocity, an Aristotelian in the flourishing proper to rational animals, and even some theists in the imago Dei. The convergence is enough for present purposes. Across these traditions runs the thought that rational beings are not clay in the morally inert sense. They are loci of claim, not merely objects of arrangement.

Once these principles are granted, several clarifications follow. First, gratitude is not identical with obedience. It may be appropriate to thank one who has benefited or rescued us. But gratitude has limits. It cannot rationally require the surrender of judgment. A surgeon may save my life without acquiring the right to command my political allegiance. A parent may preserve my existence without earning perpetual jurisdiction over my adulthood. The moral grammar of gratitude includes recognition, not servitude.

Second, asymmetry does not erase reciprocity. A child and parent are unequal in power and development, yet the parent still owes reasons appropriate to the child's stage. A citizen and state are unequal in coercive capacity, yet the state still owes public justification. Similarly, if God and human beings are radically asymmetrical, that asymmetry alone cannot abolish the requirement of justification. In fact it heightens the need for safeguards against arbitrary domination, because the governed are more vulnerable, not less.

Third, dependence is morally ambiguous. It can ground duties of care on the stronger side, not merely duties of submission on the weaker. If I create a vulnerable being, my first responsibility is not to demand worship but to secure the conditions under which that being may flourish without arbitrary harm. Creation may increase the creator's obligations before it increases the creature's. This reverses a common theological intuition. The more absolute the dependency, the stronger the case that the creator owes impeccable justification, not that the creature owes unquestioning obedience.

Fourth, the language of authority is prone to equivocation. Sometimes "authority" means expertise. A physician has authority in diagnosis, a mathematician in proof, a historian in archives, a sage in insight. This sort of authority is epistemic and defeasible. It does not automatically entail the right to command. At other times "authority" means office-backed jurisdiction: the standing to issue binding directives and enforce consequences. Much confusion enters when divine authority is defended by sliding between these senses. Even if God, if real, had unrivaled epistemic superiority, the move from "knows best" to "has the right to rule" still requires argument. Expertise warrants deference under some conditions; it does not warrant sovereignty by default.

These first principles do not emerge in a philosophical vacuum. Contemporary analytic philosophy of religion has addressed adjacent questions with considerable rigor, and intellectual honesty requires engagement before the argument proceeds.

The most sustained tradition of reflection on divine command and moral obligation runs through Philip Quinn's *Divine Commands and Moral Requirements* (1978) and Robert Adams's mature account in *Finite and Infinite Goods* (1999). Quinn defends a strong divine command theory: moral obligations just *are* divine commands, such that the right and the required are fully constituted by what God wills. Adams offers a more nuanced variant — modified divine command theory — on which moral wrongness is identified not with bare divine prohibition but with prohibition by a God who is essentially and perfectly good. The present framework is not straightforwardly a critique of either position. It operates at a different level. Even if one granted Adams's full account — that obligations just are commands from a perfectly loving God — the jurisdictional question would survive intact: *by what right* does a perfectly good being issue binding directives to rational agents who did not consent to that governance?

The goodness of the governor explains why the commands track genuinely good outcomes. It does not, without further argument, explain why the commander possesses legislative jurisdiction over distinct agents. Adams himself distinguishes between God as the good and God as the source of obligation, but the bridge between them — from supreme goodness to rightful command — is assumed rather than demonstrated. John Hare's related work, particularly *The Moral Gap* (1996), argues that human beings require divine assistance to close the distance between moral demand and moral capacity. That may be true, and it is not a claim this framework disputes. But a gap in human moral capacity is a reason to accept *help*, not to accept *rule*. The physician who supplies what we cannot supply for ourselves does not thereby acquire sovereignty over us. Hare's argument, if sound, establishes a reason for gratitude and receptivity toward a perfectly good source of moral assistance. It does not bridge the distance from receptivity to obligation.[2]

Nicholas Wolterstorff's *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (2008) provides resources that both support and complicate the present argument. Wolterstorff grounds rights in the inherent worth of persons — worth that he ultimately anchors in the love of God. The jurisdictional framework agrees that persons have inherent worth and that this worth generates claims no authority may override. It departs from Wolterstorff at precisely the moment he derives the ground of worth from divine love: if personal worth depends on being loved by God, then God's withdrawal of love would destabilize the very worth that is supposed to constrain divine authority. The present framework requires that personal worth be prior to, not derived from, any authority claim — including divine ones. What Wolterstorff contributes, even against this reservation, is a serious account of why persons cannot be treated as raw material for another's purposes. The second principle of interactive accountability developed above draws from exactly this tradition, even where it cannot follow Wolterstorff's theistic grounding all the way.

The sharpest philosophical pressure on the consent constraint comes not from theology but from analytic ethics. Derek Parfit's analysis of what has since been called the non-identity problem — developed in *Reasons and Persons* (1984) — creates a genuine difficulty for consent-based critiques of creation. The problem is this: the specific persons who exist are the products of the very choices, including the conditions of their entrance into being, that the consent framework wishes to evaluate. A different world, with different conditions, would contain different persons. The persons who actually exist cannot coherently say they were harmed by the conditions of their creation, since without precisely those conditions they would not exist to be harmed. Parfit himself finds this result troubling and works extensively to preserve the intuition that future persons can nonetheless be wronged by the choices that bring them into being.

The present framework acknowledges this difficulty as genuine. It does not claim that persons are harmed relative to a counterfactual in which they never existed. Its claim is narrower and more defensible: that the *structure* of a governance relation imposed on beings who had no standing to negotiate its terms, combined with severe and inescapable consequences for non-compliance, creates a legitimacy deficit independent of whether the governed were harmed by being brought into existence. The non-identity problem cuts against harm-based versions of the birth objection. It does not cut against the consent-and-jurisdiction version, which asks not whether persons would prefer non-existence but whether the terms of an unchosen governance relation can be legitimate without any form of endorsement by the governed.[3]

Rawlsian and Scanlonian contractualism press in a related direction. T. M. Scanlon's account in *What We Owe to Each Other* (1998) grounds moral obligation in principles that no one could reasonably reject. The jurisdictional framework is structurally sympathetic to this move: it too asks whether the governed, as rational agents capable of evaluation, could endorse the authority relation under which they find themselves. The difficulty with applying Scanlon directly is that his framework presupposes a community of roughly equal reasoners who can identify themselves as potential parties to principles. The divine-human relation is characterized by radical asymmetry of knowledge, power, and circumstance. The question is therefore not only whether a rational agent could reasonably reject the terms, but whether the conditions under which the agent deliberates are themselves sufficiently non-coercive for the acceptance or rejection to carry moral weight. Infinite stakes, partial evidence, unchosen birth into interpretive traditions, and an authority that cannot be directly questioned do not constitute the conditions under which Scanlonian reasonable acceptance is possible. This is not a failure of contractualism. It is a further specification of why the legitimacy deficit is structural rather than merely procedural.

These engagements do not dissolve the first principles stated above; they sharpen them. The consent constraint is not derived arbitrarily from secular political theory. It is the point where multiple analytic traditions — however divergent in their positive accounts — converge on a shared minimum: that authority over rational agents carries a justificatory

burden, and that the burden must be discharged by something other than mere power, origin, or goodness of intention.

Finally, first principles impose discipline on both sides of the debate. The critic of divine authority must not assume that any asymmetry is oppression or that every unchosen condition is automatically illegitimate. We do not choose gravity, mortality, embodiment, or the historical fact of being born into a language and a time. Not all unchosen structures are governments. The theist, however, must not treat all dependence as if it already contained consent, all benefit as if it already contained allegiance, or all goodness as if it already contained jurisdiction. The gap between fact and right remains.

These clarifications matter because the argument that follows does not rest on a single emotional intuition but on the steady application of standards already used elsewhere. If persons matter as persons, then authority must answer to them. If legitimacy is distinct from causation, then creation does not settle rule. And if consent is part of the grammar of non-domination, then any total, inescapable, and unchosen system of command stands under a burden of proof it has not yet discharged.

7. Human Nature, Dependency, and the Asymmetry of Birth

Every theory of legitimacy eventually reveals its anthropology. The reason the birth problem matters so much is not only that no one consents to be born, but that birth introduces persons into existence at the exact point of maximum dependence and minimum agency. Human beings arrive unable to choose their environment, incapable of refusing exposure, and radically vulnerable to conditions they did not author. Any framework that wishes to speak about obligation, gratitude, guilt, or rebellion must therefore begin with the anthropology of entrance: what sort of being is the human being at the threshold where rule first takes hold?

The first answer is obvious but often philosophically underused. Human beings are needy before they are reflective. They are embodied before they are ideological. They do not enter the world as sovereign choosers confronting a menu of metaphysical options. They enter as dependent organisms whose earliest experiences of power are asymmetrical, unchosen, and often unintelligible. This matters because theological pictures of obedience are often modeled, explicitly or implicitly, on the parent-child relation. Yet the parent-child relation is legitimate only under narrow conditions: care must be oriented toward the child's flourishing; power must be temporary; explanation must increase as the child matures; and the endpoint of successful authority is the child's own competent autonomy. Any form of authority that permanently infantilizes the governed discloses its own defect.

This is where the asymmetry of birth becomes decisive. A creator who introduces finite beings into a field of danger, opacity, need, and evaluative burden cannot simply cite authorship as justification. Authorship explains causal origin. It does not explain why the resulting relation should carry enduring rights of command. In fact, once the beings created

are persons rather than artifacts, authorship becomes morally thinner, not thicker. We do not think the one who causes the existence of a person thereby owns that person's ends. Parenthood at its best is precisely the labor of relinquishing proprietorial temptation.

The human case reveals the point from below. Because human beings are born dependent, they require institutions of care; because they become reflective, they also require those institutions to justify themselves. The vulnerability of infancy does not erase the autonomy of adulthood; it creates a duty to steward beings toward it. A political order that argued, "You needed us once, therefore you owe us permanent obedience," would expose itself as predatory. Dependency can generate duties of care. It cannot manufacture a perpetual title to rule.

There is a second anthropological truth. Human beings are meaning-making creatures under scarcity. They narrate dependence because dependence is terrifying. They are therefore psychologically susceptible to any cosmic picture that turns vulnerability into purpose, exposure into plan, and authority into shelter. This susceptibility helps explain the cultural durability of theological sovereignty. It offers an emotional grammar for contingency. Yet philosophy must not confuse the consoling function of an idea with its justificatory force. A child may feel safer under an unquestioned father. That does not tell us whether the father's authority is legitimate, still less whether a cosmic analogue is.

At the same time, Omittoism should avoid the opposite error of imagining the human being as a pure atom whose only moral interest is immunity from all claims. Human beings are relational, porous, unfinished, and interdependent. They need language, recognition, institutions, memory, and inherited practices. But this relational anthropology supports the framework rather than weakens it. Precisely because human beings flourish through relations, authority must be answerable to the kind of beings over whom it is exercised. Power over stones can be instrumental. Power over persons must reckon with interpretation, suffering, dignity, and the possibility of reflective refusal.

The asymmetry of birth also sharpens the issue of responsibility. Many theological systems hold that the conditions under which persons first awaken morally are already charged with consequence. One is born into sin, into estrangement, into a fallen order, into a cosmic test, or into inherited debt. But the more heavily burdened the point of entrance becomes, the more acute the legitimacy question grows. To place a person into a morally loaded environment without prior consent and then treat their responses within that environment as the basis of ultimate judgment is to create a serious problem of fairness. The question is not whether finite agents can ever be responsible. Of course they can. The question is whether responsibility is being attached to conditions the agent never had the standing to negotiate.

This is why the birth problem is not solved by saying that life is a gift. Gifts have a normative structure. A gift does not normally impose unlimited debt on the recipient, and a gift that cannot be refused without catastrophe occupies a morally ambiguous category. To give existence under conditions where refusal is impossible, interpretation is uncertain, and

existential risk is immense is not yet to give in a sense that secures moral authority. The rhetoric of gift can illuminate generosity; it can also mask asymmetry.

An adequate philosophy of human nature must therefore hold three truths together. We are vulnerable beings. We are sense-making beings. And we are developing beings whose dignity includes the right to evaluate the powers that shape us. Omittoism takes all three seriously. It refuses to romanticize dependency, refuses to deny relationality, and refuses to treat maturity as ingratitude. The person who asks the cosmos by what right it governs is not thereby denying creatureliness. They are exercising the very faculty that any morally serious account of personhood must protect: the capacity to distinguish causation from legitimacy, nurture from ownership, and reverence from surrender.

8. Creation Is Not Ownership

The most common intuitive defense of divine rule is also the oldest: God made us, therefore God has the right to govern us. The argument carries force because creation seems more intimate and comprehensive than any human relation. If one being is literally the source of another's existence, perhaps that asymmetry grounds an authority deeper than political authority and more basic than contract. The thought is understandable. It is also philosophically insufficient.

To see why, one must distinguish several claims often fused together. "God created us" may mean that God is the causal source of our existence. "God sustains us" may mean that our continued existence depends on divine activity. "God knows our nature" may mean that God understands what fulfills us better than we do. "God is good" may mean that divine intentions are benevolent. Each of these claims, if true, has implications. But none on its own entails rightful sovereignty. Causal origin, ontological support, epistemic superiority, and moral goodness are not identical with legislative jurisdiction.

Begin with origin. To be the source of something is not necessarily to own it. Artists do not own the interior lives of their children any more than of their artworks, and even ownership of artworks is governed by norms external to mere production. In human morality, the closer the case comes to personhood, the less plausible ownership becomes. We allow ownership of objects partly because objects have no standpoint of their own. Persons do. They can consent, refuse, suffer, interpret, and resist. Their existence as centers of experience interrupts the logic of property. The idea that a creator owns persons because he made them imports the grammar of manufacture into the domain of moral standing. That importation is exactly what modern ethics should reject.

One might respond that divine creation differs from human generation because God creates ex nihilo, from nothing, whereas parents merely transmit life. But this does not solve the normative problem. It intensifies the causal claim; it does not bridge the gap to legitimacy. To create from nothing may establish deeper dependency. It does not show why

dependency should generate obedience rather than heightened responsibility on the creator's side. If I deliberately create a vulnerable consciousness, aware that it can suffer, fear, and be burdened by demands, then the moral pressure falls at least as much on me to justify the terms of its existence as on it to submit to me.

The appeal to sustenance does not help enough either. Suppose all creatures depend continuously on God for continued being. This would make the relation more radical than ordinary parenthood. But dependence is not the same as authority. We depend on oxygen, sunlight, ecosystems, language communities, and countless inherited structures. Some dependencies generate reasons for care and prudence. None by themselves generate the duty to worship or obey. The move from "X is the condition of your life" to "therefore you owe X allegiance" is not analytic. It must be argued. Otherwise necessity itself becomes the criterion of right, and might collapses into legitimacy.

The appeal to goodness also leaves the core issue unresolved. If God is perfectly good, perhaps God deserves trust. But trust is not identical with jurisdiction. A good friend may deserve confidence without ruling me. A wise advisor may deserve deference without sovereignty. The fact that someone reliably wills my good does not establish their right to command my will as such. At most it may establish reasons to listen seriously. The transformation of reliability into rightful rule again requires an additional step.

A revealing analogy is parenthood. Parents do have authority over children, but it is neither absolute nor proprietary. It is custodial, developmental, and temporary. It exists for the sake of the child's emergence into agency. As the child matures, parental authority properly contracts. This is not because parents cease to love or understand. It is because the child's own standing as an agent becomes decisive. If even the most intimate natural creators do not possess unlimited authority over the persons they generate, why should a cosmic creator automatically possess more? The difference in scale does not erase the principle; it simply invites reapplication.

The theological reply often says that unlike parents, God does not merely begin our lives but defines our nature and telos. We are made for God, and therefore obedience is not alien rule but fidelity to what we are. This is a more sophisticated claim, and it deserves separate treatment later, especially in its Thomistic form. But notice what has happened. The argument has already shifted away from bare creation. It now relies on teleology, not simple origin; on the content of flourishing, not mere causation. That shift itself concedes an important point: creation alone was not enough.

There is also an asymmetry hidden in the rhetoric of ownership. When human beings create machines, programs, or institutions, we expect them to bear responsibility for foreseeable defects, harms, and vulnerabilities in what they produce. Yet when divine creation is invoked, responsibility often flows in the opposite direction: because creatures were made, they owe the maker obedience, even when the structure of the world includes suffering, hiddenness, ambiguity, and ruin. The more one emphasizes God as designer, the harder it becomes to insulate God from responsibility for the conditions under which

creatures must deliberate. Creation cannot be invoked only when it empowers rule and ignored when it intensifies responsibility.

The point may be put starkly. If creation establishes ownership, then the creature's moral protest is already disqualified. If it does not, then protest remains intelligible. But if protest remains intelligible, the creator has entered the space of justification. The creature may then ask: Why these terms? Why this exposure to suffering? Why this opacity? Why these sanctions? Why this demand for worship? Why this asymmetry? Creation cannot both silence the question and make the answer unnecessary. The very fact that the creature can ask already reveals that personhood has interrupted the logic of possession.

It might be said that the language of "ownership" is crude and that mature theology rarely uses it. Fair enough. Many refined theists would speak instead of lordship, providence, or participation in being. Yet the moral problem remains if practical religion still treats divine command as binding because of divine creative status. Whether the vocabulary is proprietary or liturgical, the inferential structure is similar: source implies rule. This essay denies that the implication holds without further justification.

What, then, follows from creation, if not ownership? Several things. It may ground gratitude under some conditions. It may ground a duty of care on the creator's side. It may establish that the creature's flourishing is not morally irrelevant to the source. It may justify the hope that the universe is intelligible or purposive. It may even ground an invitation into relation. But invitation is not jurisdiction. Care is not command. Origin is not sovereignty. To insist on this is not to deny the majesty of creation; it is to refuse the slide from metaphysical grandeur to moral entitlement.

9. The Birth Problem and the Failure of Tacit Consent

If creation does not by itself establish authority, perhaps consent does. Political legitimacy in the modern world is often thought to require, in one form or another, the consent of the governed. Yet no human being consents to being born. No one signs into the universe, negotiates its terms, reviews its risks, or chooses the conditions under which their existence will unfold. This unchosen entry into being creates what may be called the birth problem: if existence is imposed without prior consultation, on what basis can the resulting order claim legitimacy over the beings thus placed within it?

The birth problem is not a sentimental complaint against finitude. It is a structural point about the relation between involuntary existence and claims of obedience. To say that life is a gift does not solve it, because gifts usually permit refusal. A "gift" that cannot be declined, escaped, or reconfigured without destroying the recipient is not a gift in the ordinary moral sense. It is a condition imposed. That condition may still become meaningful or even welcome, but its involuntary character remains philosophically salient.

One common response is to invoke tacit consent. Perhaps by continuing to exist, by enjoying the goods of life, by participating in the world, human beings implicitly consent to the terms of the order under which they live. Versions of this argument appear not only in theology but also in political thought. Yet the modern critique of tacit consent is powerful and directly relevant.[2] For consent to be meaningful, the consenting party must understand that their conduct counts as consent and must have a reasonable alternative. Otherwise the inference from behavior to endorsement is defective.

Neither condition is satisfied in the cosmic case. First, no one is born with knowledge that mere survival will be interpreted as agreement to divine rule. Second, there is no reasonable alternative to continued existence except death, and if some religious systems are correct, even death does not constitute exit from divine jurisdiction. An arrangement under which "consent" is inferred from remaining alive within an inescapable system is structurally coercive. It resembles the logic by which a captive's acceptance of food is taken as endorsement of captivity. The fact that one eats does not show that one agrees to the prison.

The theological counterargument often says that one cannot consent to metaphysical reality in the way one consents to a contract, because existence itself is the precondition of any possible act of consent. That is true, and it matters. But it does not rescue legitimacy. It shows precisely why the burden of justification intensifies. If those subject to rule could not have consented in advance because they did not yet exist, then the mere absence of prior consent cannot be remedied by pretending that imposed existence later counts as endorsement. At minimum, the structure reveals that divine rule, if real, is non-consensual at its foundation. The question then becomes whether there are compensating features strong enough to justify that fact. It does not disappear.

Some may object that consent is too demanding a standard because many legitimate human relations are unchosen. We do not choose our parents, native language, historical moment, vulnerability to disease, or need for others. This is correct, but again it proves less than it seems. Not every unchosen condition is an authority relation. Mortality is imposed, but mortality does not command worship. Gravity constrains us, but gravity does not judge us. Language precedes us, but language does not threaten eternal punishment. The birth problem arises not from the mere fact of unchosen conditions, but from the combination of unchosen conditions with a claim of rightful rule.

A more subtle response says that divine consent may be retrospective rather than prior. Perhaps the life of a mature person offers sufficient evidence, meaning, and goodness that continued participation can count as reflective endorsement. This possibility should not be dismissed. One can imagine a world in which rational creatures, once mature, are presented with clear options, adequate information, and meaningful modes of assent or refusal. If they then endorse divine relationship under conditions free from coercive asymmetry, something like consent might become intelligible. But this is not the structure of most classical religious

[2] The definitive statement is Hume's own, in *Of the Original Contract* (1748): a peasant born in France who has never left his village cannot meaningfully be said to have consented to French governance merely by remaining. The application to cosmic jurisdiction is structurally identical but more acute, since the "territory" is existence itself.

pictures. In many of them, the evidence is partial, the traditions conflict, the stakes are infinite, and refusal invites devastating consequences. Such conditions compromise consent rather than secure it.

The issue becomes sharper when one considers children, the vulnerable, and the cognitively limited. If divine jurisdiction is universal, it extends over beings incapable of informed endorsement. If salvation or judgment hinges on beliefs or responses that many agents are structurally unable to form in a clear way, then the gap between legitimacy and mere power widens. A system that binds all while clarifying itself only ambiguously to many cannot take refuge in the rhetoric of voluntary acceptance.

The birth problem also has an existential edge. To be born is to find oneself already in a story not of one's choosing, under laws one did not draft, in a body one did not select, amid risks one did not approve. Many philosophical and literary traditions begin from this thrownness. The present argument does not romanticize it into heroism or despair. It simply notes that thrownness is not the same as endorsement. If authority enters into that already-thrown condition, the authority owes more than a demand for submission. It owes an account of itself proportionate to the involuntariness of the situation.

This is why appeals to "you owe God everything because without God you would not exist" are philosophically unstable. They treat the benefit of existence as if it were both unquestionably beneficial to each subject and sufficient to override the demand for consent. Yet existence is complex. It contains joy and terror, intimacy and loss, beauty and horror, hope and ruin. To assume that being alive automatically places one in debt to the source is to legislate from the outside over a question lived from within. Some lives are welcomed; some are endured; many are mixed. A legitimacy theory cannot simply convert ambivalent existence into automatic allegiance.

It might still be said that the creature, once existing, has no right to complain because nonexistence could not have been preferable to a nonexistent subject. But this move equivocates. The question is not whether a nonexistent subject can compare states. It is whether the imposition of existence can by itself authorize rule over the one made to exist. That inference does not follow. Even if existence is, all things considered, a great good, it does not automatically generate a debt of obedience. Benefits may call for gratitude; they do not cancel the distinction between gift and domination.

The birth problem therefore does not prove that divine authority is impossible. It does show that such authority, if it exists, begins from a non-consensual structure and must answer for it. Any theology that treats mere existence as tacit agreement has confused necessity with endorsement. Inescapability is not legitimacy. Survival is not consent. Remaining alive under imposed terms is not the same as saying yes.

10. The Birth Problem in Full: Entrance, Exposure, and the Structure of Non-Consent

The earlier argument introduced what may be called the birth problem, but the issue deserves fuller development because it is the point at which the entire architecture of jurisdictional sovereignty becomes most vivid. No human being consents to coming into existence. This is not merely a contingent fact about the psychology of infancy or the limitations of memory. It is a structural fact about the human condition. One does not sign into life, negotiate its terms, inspect its risks, or select the order into which one will be placed. One is delivered into a world that is already underway: into language, dependency, mortality, hierarchy, vulnerability, and the possibility of profound suffering. If a theological framework then declares that this already-imposed condition includes an authority relation of the highest possible kind, the burden of justification is immediate. The authority claim arrives after the imposition, not before it.

This does not mean that every unchosen relation is illegitimate. Much of life is unchosen. We do not choose our parents, biology, initial language, historical era, or native capacities. But the fact that many conditions are unchosen is not an argument that all further structures built on them are justified. On the contrary, the moral significance of an unchosen condition often consists precisely in the responsibilities it places on those who wield power within it. A child does not choose dependence. That is why guardianship is constrained by fiduciary obligations. A patient undergoing emergency treatment may not be able to consent in the ordinary way. That is why the physician is bound by a heightened duty of care rather than a widened license to dominate. The deeper the dependency, the heavier the obligation on the powerful side to justify, limit, and humanize the exercise of power.

The theological move from creation to obligation often bypasses this moral asymmetry. It treats the dependence of the creature as if it naturally generated the creature's duty to obey, when at least part of the truth runs in the opposite direction: the more radical the creature's involuntary dependence, the stronger the case that the creator owes explanations, protections, and non-arbitrary conditions. If I bring a vulnerable being into existence without its prior consent, I cannot plausibly claim that the very fact of its vulnerability now entitles me to unconditional authority over it. The act of bringing into being may generate responsibilities before it generates claims. Indeed, unless additional argument is supplied, it generates responsibilities only.

A common response is that consent cannot be required for existence, because prior to existence there is no subject available to consent. This is true and irrelevant. Jurisdictional sovereignty does not argue that creation is wrong because prenatal consent was impossible. Its claim is narrower and more precise. It says that where prior consent is impossible, later claims of comprehensive authority cannot simply cite the fact of creation as though the consent problem had disappeared. The impossibility of prior consent does not create legitimacy ex nihilo. It merely means legitimacy must be sought elsewhere. The gap remains. One cannot say: "Because you could not consent before existing, your later obligation to obey is settled by default." That is not a resolution of the problem. It is a restatement of the power imbalance.

Nor can the problem be dissolved by appealing to gratitude. Gratitude is often morally fitting when one receives an unsolicited benefit. But gratitude has a shape. It is responsive, particular, and bounded. It is not the same as political subjection. If I rescue a stranger from drowning, the stranger may owe thanks, perhaps even special regard, but not lifelong obedience. If parents provide food, shelter, education, and care, the child may later owe love or gratitude, but not servility, not the surrender of judgment, and not an unlimited debt. Gratitude acknowledges goods received; it does not transform the recipient into property. A theology that turns existence itself into an infinite bill of obligation confuses benefaction with sovereignty.

The birth problem becomes even sharper when one asks about terms rather than mere entry. Human beings do not merely enter existence without consent; they enter particular conditions without consent. They are born with specific bodies, into specific social structures, into particular distributions of power, deprivation, disease, and violence. Some are born into relative safety. Others are born into famine, war, inherited stigma, or chronic pain. If existence is coupled with a cosmic jurisdiction that claims moral allegiance from every creature, then those conditions are not morally incidental. They become part of the environment within which allegiance is solicited. But then the authority relation is never encountered under neutral circumstances. It is encountered under asymmetrical, often harsh, and radically unequal conditions. The question therefore changes from “Did anyone consent to existence?” to “How can an authority claim universal legitimacy when the governed are introduced to it through such unequal and involuntary terms?”

At this stage one might propose tacit consent: perhaps continued participation in life amounts to endorsement of the order that sustains life. But tacit consent has strict conditions if it is to mean anything. It requires an intelligible alternative, reasonable knowledge of the arrangement being accepted, and the ability to decline without catastrophic penalty. None of these conditions is satisfied by bare human existence. There is no ordinary exit from existence except self-destruction, and self-destruction is not a neutral exit comparable to moving out of a political jurisdiction. It is the annihilation or severe endangerment of the very subject whose consent is at issue. A contract that can be rejected only by destroying oneself is not meaningfully voluntary. It resembles duress extended to the level of ontology.

The point is not melodramatic. It is analytical. If a person is locked in a room and told that remaining inside counts as acceptance of the owner’s authority, while the only alternative is death, we do not say the person has tacitly consented. We say the structure invalidates consent. Similarly, if existence under divine rule is presented as an all-or-nothing condition, with no possibility of simply declining jurisdiction while remaining, then continued existence cannot bear the moral weight theology often places on it. It may reveal attachment to life, fear of death, uncertainty, hope, confusion, or resignation. It does not by itself reveal endorsement of an alleged ruler.

There is also a temporal asymmetry that deserves notice. Human moral development occurs within the very order whose legitimacy is under question. We are taught language, normativity, and often religion before we possess the reflective capacity to evaluate them.

When traditions later interpret acquiescence as evidence of natural consent or rightful submission, they risk reading socialization as endorsement. But habituation is not consent. One may internalize a structure long before one has the conceptual means to examine it. Indeed, much domination survives precisely by presenting itself as metaphysically obvious before the governed learn how to ask for reasons.

The birth problem therefore yields a more general principle. Whenever an authority relation is total, prior to reflection, and tied to the basic conditions of continued existence, the ordinary signs of compliance lose evidentiary force. Obedience, ritual participation, gratitude, fear, prayer, and even love become ambiguous because they arise inside a field where exit is unclear and dependence is absolute. Under such conditions, the burden of proving legitimacy rises dramatically. To say that creatures obey is not enough. One must ask under what conditions they were made, what alternatives they possessed, what knowledge they had, and what consequences shadowed refusal.

For this reason the birth problem is not an emotional protest against being alive. It is a conceptual challenge to any doctrine that reads imposed existence as the beginning of political debt. A creature may receive existence, may even cherish it, and still deny that the giver thereby acquires jurisdiction over conscience. That denial is not ingratitude. It is the refusal to confuse origin with title.

The deepest importance of the birth problem lies in what it reveals about moral perspective. We often think the central question is whether life is a gift. Sometimes it is. Often it feels so. But a gift, precisely as a gift, does not nullify the recipient’s standing as a free and evaluative being. A genuine gift does not arrive with hidden sovereignty folded inside it. If existence is given, the moral dignity of the recipient includes the right to ask whether the giver is also a ruler, and if so, by what right. The right to ask that question is part of what makes the recipient more than a project. It is part of what makes a person.

Part III. Knowledge, Hiddenness, and Rule

The third movement addresses the epistemic conditions of legitimate authority. A ruler who binds conscience must communicate adequately, interpret fairly, and avoid coercing assent under conditions of radical ambiguity and infinite stakes.

11. Hiddenness, Law, and the Standards of Legitimate Rule

Authority is not only about origin and consent. It is also about intelligibility. A ruler who binds subjects by laws they cannot identify, interpret, or verify governs badly even if the laws are wise. Legislative clarity is therefore a condition of legitimacy. Rules must be accessible enough to guide those held responsible under them. Theological systems often struggle here, and the struggle is not merely epistemic. It is political.

Consider the structure of many religious traditions. A supremely important lawgiver allegedly issues commands bearing on salvation, worship, sexuality, justice, diet, family, suffering, death, and the ultimate destiny of persons. Yet these commands are mediated through texts of disputed meaning, traditions of contested authority, languages inaccessible to most, institutions prone to power, and histories full of schism. Sincere seekers reach incompatible conclusions. Whole civilizations inherit different revelations. Even within single traditions, morally serious interpreters diverge on what God requires. If this were a human government, the opacity would count heavily against its legitimacy.

The usual theological answer is that hiddenness serves a higher purpose.[3] God does not coerce belief by overwhelming clarity because God desires freely given faith, love, or trust. There is insight in this response. Some goods do seem to require freedom rather than compulsion. But the point has limits. Clarity is not coercion. If a parent tells a child clearly not to drink poison, that clarity does not violate freedom. If a state publishes laws plainly, it does not destroy citizenship. If anything, obscurity undermines responsible agency by forcing persons to guess at what is demanded of them.

A deeper difficulty follows. Religious hiddenness is not merely the absence of spectacle. It is often the absence of decisive legislative clarity under conditions of extreme stakes. If the wrong response to divine command can result in eternal loss, then ambiguity becomes morally weighty. A just ruler does not attach infinite consequences to contestable interpretation. The more severe the sanction, the stronger the obligation to communicate unmistakably. Otherwise agents are punished not only for disobedience but for hermeneutic misfortune.

This problem is magnified by the pluralism of religious history. Billions of people are born into traditions not of their choosing. Their earliest formation often shapes what appears rational, holy, obvious, or repugnant. If salvation or favor depends on finding the right revelation under such conditions, then the distribution of epistemic fortune becomes morally central. Some are born near authoritative institutions; others are not. Some inherit coherent interpretive communities; others inherit fragmentation or indifference. A legitimacy framework cannot ignore this distributive unevenness. Justice is not served merely because a truth is in principle available somewhere.

There is also a tension between hiddenness and accountability. Theologically, believers are often told both that God's ways are beyond human comprehension and that God is perfectly good. But if the divine will is too opaque for moral evaluation, then the attribution of goodness loses content. One cannot use moral language robustly in praise and evacuate it in critique. Either human concepts of justice, goodness, and legitimacy have enough continuity with divine predicates to support worship, in which case they also support

[3] The most philosophically developed defence of divine hiddenness as compatible with love is J.L. Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Cornell, 1993). Schellenberg argues, contra the present framework on one point, that hiddenness itself counts *against* theism rather than merely against divine legitimacy. The jurisdictional approach is more conservative: it suspends the question of existence and asks whether hiddenness is compatible with *rule*, which is a distinct and in some ways sharper question.

evaluation; or they do not, in which case the praise becomes largely unintelligible. Mystery may have a place in metaphysics. It cannot be a universal solvent for political scrutiny.

The hiddenness problem intersects with the issue of conscience. In many religious traditions, conscience is honored as the site of moral seriousness, yet also distrusted when it diverges from alleged divine commands. This produces an unstable picture. If conscience matters, then the agent's own evaluative powers are not trivial. If conscience does not matter where it conflicts with revelation, then the rhetoric of moral responsibility becomes hollow. To be responsible for obedience while being denied the standing to judge the justice of what one is asked to obey is a form of moral infantilization. Legitimate authority should call forth mature agency, not suspend it.

One might reply that divine law is in fact clear at the level that matters most: love God and love neighbor. On this generous reading, the complexities of doctrine are secondary. This is one of the strongest theological replies because it narrows the demand and aligns it with a humane ethic. Yet even here the problems do not vanish. The command to love God presupposes that God is the kind of being who may rightly demand love, and that the agent can identify that being without confusion. The command to love neighbor may indeed carry moral force, but precisely because it can be grasped independently of sectarian revelation. In that case, divine legislation becomes morally redundant where it is clearest and disputed where it is most distinctive.

A legitimacy critique therefore does not require proving that God is hidden in an absolute sense. It is enough to show that the available modes of revelation are inadequate to the scale of the authority claim. A local magistrate might communicate imperfectly and remain legitimate if the stakes are moderate and the procedures reviewable. A cosmic legislator who binds all persons in conscience and destiny requires much more. The higher the jurisdiction, the stronger the communicative duty.

The issue may be summarized simply. Law that is unclear to those bound by it is defective. Sanctions distributed under such law are suspect. Appeals to mystery do not eliminate the defect; they shift it into theology. If God seeks not terrified compliance but morally significant allegiance, then intelligibility is not an optional courtesy. It is part of justice. Hiddenness, where it impairs responsible agency under high stakes, therefore functions not only as a metaphysical puzzle but as an indictment of governance.

12. Truth, Testimony, and the Burden of Revelation

Any authority that claims the right to bind conscience incurs an epistemic burden. This is true in law, medicine, science, and politics, and the burden only intensifies when the stakes are ultimate. If a system of rule says that one's deepest obligations, highest goods, or final destiny depend on recognizing and responding to its directives, then the standards of communication cannot remain casual. The problem of hiddenness is therefore also a problem

of testimony: by what medium are the alleged commands of the ruler made available, how stable is their interpretation, how public is the evidence, and how fair is it to assign consequences under conditions of durable ambiguity?

The common theological answer is that revelation has been provided. Yet revelation, in practice, does not appear as unmediated public law. It appears through texts, traditions, institutions, memories, translations, charismatic interpreters, and competing canons of credibility. Even when revelation is treated as perfect in origin, access to it is socially distributed and interpretively fragile. The issue is not that all interpretation is avoidable; no serious theory requires that. The issue is proportionality between the clarity of the demand and the magnitude of the consequence. If the law is difficult to identify, if its meaning is contested, if honest inquiry leads to divergent conclusions, and if existential sanctions are still attached, then the system courts epistemic unfairness.

This is where the analogy to public reason becomes instructive. A legitimate order does not merely possess truth; it makes its demands intelligible to those over whom it rules. It does not expect obedience to private evidence available only to a favored subgroup. Nor does it assign maximal guilt to subjects for failing to decode ambiguous signs across hostile historical conditions. A just regime takes account of cognitive limitation, unequal access, cultural inheritance, linguistic mediation, trauma, and the simple fact that interpretation is not performed in a vacuum. Theology often acknowledges these facts pastorally while bracketing them juridically. Omittoism insists that they matter at the level of legitimacy itself.

The burden of revelation is especially sharp because many traditions combine three claims that sit in tension: first, that the truth is of supreme importance; second, that human destiny depends on one's orientation toward that truth; and third, that the available route to the truth is interpretively complex, historically uneven, and psychologically entangled. One may soften the consequences, widen the gates of salvation, or emphasize divine mercy, but these moves implicitly concede the core point: where communication is uncertain, severe judgment becomes harder to justify. The more merciful the theology becomes in response, the more it acknowledges the jurisdictional concern.

Some will say that God is not obliged to satisfy modern evidential standards. This may be right in one sense. The framework does not assume that a divine authority must communicate like a bureaucracy. But if a divine authority claims rights over conscience and action, then some analogue of adequate notice is unavoidable. Not because modernity is parochial, but because accountability presupposes intelligibility. A command that cannot be responsibly identified cannot ground fair blame in the ordinary sense. Mystery may be compatible with transcendence. It is not a universal solvent for problems of adjudication.

The issue also extends to sincerity. Suppose a person earnestly seeks truth, studies rival claims, weighs evidence, and reaches a conclusion different from what a given tradition demands. If the tradition still classifies that person as culpable disobedience, it must specify the epistemic fault. Did the person ignore available reasons? Act in bad faith? Refuse evidence out of vice? Or merely fail to be persuaded by an underdetermining record? The

moral difference is enormous. Systems that collapse nonconformity into rebellion often conceal this difference because it is politically useful to do so. Once again, the audit asks for distinctions.

There is an additional asymmetry worth noticing. Believers commonly ask skeptics to interpret ambiguity charitably in religion: not every silence is neglect, not every plurality is failure, not every unresolved text is confusion. Fair enough. But the same charity should run in the other direction. Where evidence is mixed and institutions have repeatedly misrepresented certainty, the skeptic's hesitation may be epistemically responsible rather than morally perverse. Omittoism is not an argument for cynicism. It is an argument that honest uncertainty under ambiguous conditions cannot be straightforwardly reclassified as guilt simply because a tradition needs decision.

At its deepest level, the burden of revelation concerns respect for the governed as knowers. Persons are not merely objects to be moved toward correct behavior; they are interpreters asked to orient their whole lives around truth claims. To respect them is not only to tell them what is right but to make available reasons proportionate to what is asked of them. A theology that values faith may worry that this makes trust impossible. Yet trust and opacity are not identical. Trust becomes meaningful precisely where one can recognize enough of the other's character and intention to entrust oneself without self-erasure.

The epistemic demand of Omittoism is therefore modest but firm. It does not say that the universe must be transparent, only that authority claims scale with communicative duty. If the claim is ultimate, the duty is weighty. If the directive binds conscience, the pathway of access matters. If sanctions are grave, ambiguity cannot be treated as a minor inconvenience. Revelation, if it is to ground rule, must answer not only the question of whether something was said, but whether it was said in a manner compatible with fair moral accountability for those expected to hear.

13. Hiddenness, Interpretation, and the Problem of Administrative Opacity

The hiddenness of God has usually been treated as an epistemological or existential problem. Why is the evidence not clearer? Why are sincere seekers left uncertain? Why does a loving God not make Himself unmistakably known? These are serious questions. But from a jurisdictional standpoint hiddenness appears under an additional description. It becomes a problem of administrative opacity. If a being claims rightful rule over all rational agents, the intelligibility of its law and the accessibility of its authority are not optional embellishments. They are central components of legitimacy.

Human political institutions are judged, among other things, by the clarity of the norms they impose. Secret laws are paradigms of injustice. Contradictory statutes, inaccessible procedures, unstable interpretations, and arbitrary enforcement all count against legitimacy.

A citizen cannot be fairly blamed for violating a rule that was never adequately promulgated or whose meaning is reasonably indeterminate. Indeed, one mark of modern political decency is precisely the effort to make law public, coherent, and reviewable. The ideal is never perfectly achieved, but the norm matters because those governed are persons, not traps.

If this is true for ordinary states, it is more true for cosmic governance. Yet much religious life unfolds under conditions that would be unacceptable in any serious human legal order. Revelation is mediated through historically local texts, written in ancient languages, interpreted through rival traditions, and filtered through institutions with their own interests, traumas, and power structures. Sects proliferate. Doctrinal disagreement persists for centuries. Foundational claims about salvation, obligation, sacrament, gender, violence, political order, and the nature of the good remain contested even among the devout. Meanwhile divine clarification, if it occurs at all, appears unevenly distributed and rarely public in a way that dissolves the disagreement.

A theist may answer that revelation is clear enough for what is essential. But that claim requires argument, not mere assertion. Essential to whom? Clear under what conditions of literacy, culture, psychology, and historical access? Clear enough to justify what range of sanctions? A norm may be "clear enough" for a life of humble orientation and still not clear enough to ground eternal consequences, comprehensive political authority, or condemnations of dissent. The standards of clarity rise with the stakes. What suffices for spiritual suggestion may not suffice for jurisdictional demand.

Consider the ordinary situation of a person born into one tradition rather than another. Their earliest image of ultimacy may already be saturated with local language, ritual, authority, fear, and belonging. By the time reflective distance emerges, the field of options is not neutral. It is morally and emotionally charged. If the divine ruler nevertheless judges the person's response as though all traditions stood before them with equal clarity, the assessment is distorted from the start. The administrative problem is not simply that truth is difficult. Much truth is difficult. The problem is that a ruler claiming universal jurisdiction seems to have chosen or tolerated methods of communication that render compliance inseparable from historical accident.

Hiddenness also affects accountability. In ordinary political life those governed can identify officeholders, challenge interpretations, demand reasons, appeal to texts, and expose contradictions. But when the ultimate ruler is hidden, appeals tend to collapse into competing human claims about what the hidden ruler wants. The structure becomes especially vulnerable to clerical capture. Priests, jurists, pastors, gurus, scholars, and charismatic leaders mediate the divine will, often sincerely, sometimes abusively, nearly always fallibly. The result is that the hiddenness of the ruler increases the discretionary power of intermediaries. History abundantly confirms what follows: where the divine command is opaque, human representatives often become harsher, more confident, and less accountable precisely because they act in the name of what cannot be publicly examined.

None of this proves that there is no God. It proves something else: hiddenness is not merely a difficulty for belief. It is a difficulty for legitimate governance. A perfectly hidden

ground of being may remain metaphysically possible. A hidden sovereign who nevertheless holds creatures fully responsible for recognizing, interpreting, and obeying His will faces a distinct justificatory problem. Administrative opacity is not neutral when sanctions are grave and jurisdiction total.

Some respond that hiddenness protects freedom. If God were too evident, creatures would be overwhelmed, their faith no longer voluntary. There is a certain insight here. Human beings often need distance in order to grow, explore, and respond without compulsion. But the defense overreaches. Evidence of a ruler's existence does not by itself coerce love or obedience. Citizens usually know their governments exist without losing freedom. Children know their parents exist without being unable to resist them. Clarity about who rules is not the same as irresistible domination. Moreover, the problem is not just hiddenness of existence but opacity of norms, motives, and interpretive authority. One can preserve moral freedom without preserving the kind of ambiguity that leaves conscientious persons scattered across incompatible revelations.

A more refined defense says that God is not absent but subtly present, discernible to those with the right moral or spiritual disposition. Yet this proposal worsens the jurisdictional difficulty unless handled with extraordinary care. If recognition of the ruler depends on possessing the right prior disposition, then the problem becomes circular. The creature must already be the sort of person who responds correctly in order to perceive correctly the authority whose legitimacy is under question. But the legitimacy of an authority cannot be established by saying that only the already well-disposed can see that it is legitimate. That would be like a regime insisting that only loyal citizens can appreciate the justice of its laws, while treating skepticism as evidence of moral defect.

The practical effects of administrative opacity are visible far beyond abstract debate. It shapes guilt. It shapes scrupulosity. It shapes sectarian hostility, inherited shame, spiritual exhaustion, and the endless moral labor of trying to infer ultimate expectations from fragmentary and conflicting signs. It also shapes the moral possibilities of dissent. Many people who leave religious frameworks do not do so because they crave license. They do so because the structure of authority no longer seems intelligible, coherent, or fair. Their dissent is often an attempt to preserve honesty under opacity.

A legitimate authority need not answer every question. No human institution can do that, and finitude is part of life. But legitimacy does require that the governed have access to the norms by which they are judged in a way proportionate to what is demanded of them. If a ruler requires worship, trust, and obedience under threat of ultimate loss, then the burden of communicative clarity is immense. Ambiguity on that scale is not spiritual elegance. It is administrative failure.

There is a further irony here. Many religious traditions emphasize that God knows the heart, the hidden intention, the unspoken burden. This is often offered as consolation, and it should be. Yet that same image implies a stark asymmetry: the ruler allegedly knows the creature inwardly while remaining obscure in return. Such asymmetry may be metaphysically inevitable, but it is politically hazardous. The one who sees all while

remaining unseen, who judges fully while revealing little, occupies exactly the structural position against which modern conceptions of accountability were designed. A power that is everywhere present, nowhere answerable, and mediated through disputed human institutions is not merely mysterious. It is, from a jurisdictional standpoint, profoundly difficult to legitimate.

Hiddenness therefore matters not only because it frustrates curiosity. It matters because it changes the moral structure of obedience. Where communication is partial, mediation contested, and sanctions immense, compliance cannot be straightforwardly interpreted as informed endorsement. The hidden ruler may still be real. The hidden ruler may still be good. But hiddenness is already a reason to suspend the inference from reality to right.

14. Freedom Under Infinite Stakes: Coercion, Worship, and the Pressure of Eternity

The defense of divine authority often appeals to freedom. God, it is said, does not compel love; He allows creatures to choose. Relationship without freedom would be hollow. Obedience without possibility of refusal would be mechanical. This is one of the strongest and most intuitive elements within theistic moral psychology. It recognizes something real: moral life requires agency. A coerced virtue is not virtue in the fullest sense. A forced confession is not trust. A compelled act of worship is not worship but theater.

Yet once the appeal to freedom is made, a further question becomes unavoidable: what kinds of conditions preserve freedom rather than merely naming it? Not every formally open choice is substantively free. A person “free” to sign a contract under starvation is not free in the same way as a person choosing between equally reasonable options. A dissident “free” to praise the regime or disappear into prison is not meaningfully free in the morally relevant sense. Human political thought has learned, often painfully, that freedom is not exhausted by the absence of immediate physical compulsion. It is also shaped by information, options, asymmetry of stakes, and the background structure of threat.

This lesson matters enormously once theology introduces eternal consequences. If the choice presented to human beings is not merely whether to worship, trust, or obey, but whether to do so under the possibility of infinite loss, then the structure of deliberation changes. The issue is not simply whether the creature can utter “no.” The issue is whether a “yes” given under the shadow of unending punishment or total existential deprivation counts as the kind of morally meaningful endorsement that can ground legitimate authority. The more disproportionate the stakes, the less plausible it becomes to call the resulting compliance free in the robust sense needed to justify allegiance.

Theological traditions differ here, but many retain some version of ultimate separation, exclusion, torment, privation, or irreversible ruin for those who refuse God. Even softened models preserve asymmetry of incomparable magnitude: finite creatures are told that their

response in a brief and epistemically clouded earthly life determines their relation to ultimate reality forever. If this is a genuine choice, it is a choice made under what political philosophy would regard as maximal pressure. The familiar analogy would not be a citizen choosing among candidates in a free election. It would be a captive choosing whether to salute a ruler while being told that refusal may result in endless suffering. To insist that the captive is still technically free is true in the thinnest sense and irrelevant in the sense that matters.

One may object that the analogy is unfair because God, unlike a tyrant, is perfectly good. But that response is premature. The entire dispute concerns whether the authority is legitimate and whether its sanctions can be reconciled with goodness. One cannot cite disputed legitimacy as the premise that validates the structure. That would be circular. The relevant question is more modest: if a human institution used incentives and threats of this scale to secure devotion, would we call the resulting devotion free enough to justify the institution? Plainly not. We would call it contaminated by coercion, even if some participants sincerely believed the ruler beneficent.

The same difficulty appears in doctrines of worship. Worship is often described as the fitting response to supreme excellence. If this were all that was meant, the idea would be less politically fraught. One may admire what is supremely admirable. One may stand in awe before beauty, truth, or holiness. But when worship is folded into a regime of command and sanction, the meaning shifts. It becomes not merely admiration but demanded recognition under authoritative terms. The result is morally unstable. Admiration is valuable when freely given; demanded admiration is one of the classic pathologies of domination. The tyrant wishes not only to be obeyed but to be loved. The deeper the dependence of the subjects, the more corrupted the demand becomes.

Some theologians try to avoid this problem by saying that Hell is self-chosen. God does not coerce; creatures exclude themselves from the source of all good. Yet even this subtler formulation fails to remove the pressure of infinite stakes. To say “you may freely refuse the source of all good, but the natural consequence is irreversible misery” is still to present a decision under radical asymmetry. Moreover, the language of self-exclusion often obscures authorship of the system. If the order of reality is such that refusal of divine authority produces endless catastrophe, then the designer of that order remains implicated. Rebranding punishment as consequence does not neutralize its coercive role.

There is also an epistemic dimension. Freedom worthy of moral esteem presupposes that the chooser has adequate access to what is being chosen. But the religious field is marked by plural traditions, disputed revelations, inherited identities, unequal education, trauma, cognitive bias, social pressure, and the pervasive possibility of error. If a creature is asked to orient life around the supreme authority under conditions of deep interpretive uncertainty, then the moral significance of refusal changes. Refusal may express not vice but honest uncertainty, conscientious dissent, or fidelity to one’s best judgment. A framework that still threatens ultimate ruin for such refusal does not dignify freedom. It weaponizes uncertainty against the finite.

The problem is not solved by saying that God judges hearts rather than mere doctrinal correctness. That move softens the harshness of many religious systems, but it also moves away from their stronger political claims. If what matters is ultimately sincerity, justice, and responsiveness to moral truth rather than explicit submission, then the necessity of divine jurisdiction weakens. The more theism becomes ethically ecumenical—saving those who honestly seek the good whether or not they submit to the ruler as ruler—the less weight falls on the claim of rightful political sovereignty. In effect, morality begins to outrun jurisdiction.

At the human level we often regard freedom as compromised not only by overt threat but by dependence so extreme that refusal would be devastating. An employee dependent on a single abusive employer is not ideally positioned to consent to the employer's demands. A child dependent on a parent is not fully free to reject the parent's framework. A colonized people dependent on the colonizer's institutions do not thereby legitimate the empire. In each case dependence distorts choice. If theology describes the divine-human relation as one in which every breath, every hope, every possibility of flourishing depends on one supreme being, then the conditions are not friendlier to freedom than those human cases. They are more asymmetrical still. One should therefore be more cautious, not less, about treating compliance as free endorsement.

None of this requires denying that creatures may love God authentically. They may. Many religious lives exhibit sincere devotion, courage, tenderness, and genuine moral beauty. The point is different. The existence of authentic devotion does not prove the legitimacy of the structure within which devotion emerges. People can love parents who wronged them, nations that betrayed them, institutions that dominate them, and gods whose authority they have never been permitted to examine. Human attachment is morally complex. It cannot simply be read as a referendum on legitimacy.

The jurisdictional lesson is therefore precise. A regime that places ultimate stakes on submission cannot lightly invoke freedom as its legitimating defense. It must show not merely that refusal is logically possible, but that the background conditions preserve the kind of non-coerced, informed, and morally meaningful endorsement that could justify rule. Where sanctions are infinite, information is disputed, dependence is absolute, and exit is impossible without destruction or metaphysical ruin, that showing becomes extraordinarily difficult.

One may still choose devotion under such conditions. One may even choose it nobly. But nobility of response and legitimacy of authority are separate matters. The creature's fidelity may be admirable while the structure that solicits it remains suspect. That is precisely why the appeal to freedom, far from dissolving the problem, sharpens it. Once theology says that the creature must choose, the theory must answer for the conditions under which the choice is staged.

15. Proportionality, Punishment, and the Problem of Hell

A second standard of legitimate rule is proportionality. Even where wrongdoing is real and punishment justified, sanctions must bear a meaningful relation to offense, intention, circumstance, and the moral status of persons. Human legal systems often fail this standard, but the standard remains indispensable. Without it, punishment becomes spectacle, vengeance, or domination. The same standard applies with even greater force to theological systems that assign ultimate consequences to finite lives.

The classical problem here is hell, or more broadly the idea of severe, enduring, or irreversible divine punishment.[4] The strongest versions of the doctrine are familiar: eternal conscious torment, definitive exclusion from beatitude, or irrevocable self-separation from God. Even softened accounts preserve the core thought that one's temporal moral and spiritual condition can result in consequences of boundless seriousness. The question is whether any such structure can be reconciled with legitimate authority.

The proportionality objection begins from scale. Finite agents commit wrongs under conditions of ignorance, weakness, passion, social distortion, developmental limitation, and partial knowledge. Their actions matter morally, sometimes enormously. But to map finite disobedience onto infinite punishment is already suspect. In human law, the seriousness of wrongdoing is not measured by the status of the authority offended alone, nor by the sheer fact of disobedience. It is measured by harms done, intentions formed, risks imposed, and the possibilities of rehabilitation. Punishment detached from these considerations becomes arbitrary.

The theological answer sometimes says that sin against an infinite being acquires infinite gravity. Yet this seems to confuse the greatness of the offended with the magnitude of the offense. If a child insults a head of state, the insult does not become infinitely grave because the office is exalted. In moral reasoning, the dignity of the victim matters, but it does not annihilate proportionality. Moreover, classical theism often holds that God is impassible and cannot be injured in the ordinary sense. If God cannot be harmed, then the rationale for infinite punitive reaction grows thinner, not thicker.

A more sophisticated reply says that hell is not externally imposed torture but the natural consequence of refusing communion with the highest good. On this model, God does not "send" persons to hell so much as honor their freely chosen separation. This is a powerful reformulation because it treats the damned as agents rather than objects. Yet it faces two serious problems.

First, natural consequence language does not absolve the architect of the system. If the structure of reality is such that finite creatures, formed under ambiguity and weakness, can lock themselves into endless ruin, then the designer of that structure remains morally implicated. A parent who builds a house in which one wrong choice triggers permanent agony does not escape criticism by saying the agony is simply the consequence built into the

[4] The most sophisticated recent defence of universalism — the view that no creature is finally lost — is Ilaria Ramelli, *A Larger Hope?* (Cascade, 2019). Were universalism correct, the proportionality objection in this chapter would weaken substantially, though the consent and hiddenness problems would remain unresolved.

house. Engineering choices remain normative choices when vulnerable beings must inhabit the design.

Second, the voluntariness of the choice is doubtful. For a choice to bear ultimate moral weight, the chooser must have adequate information, sufficient freedom from coercion, and realistic alternatives. Yet theological choice is often said to occur under hiddenness, doctrinal conflict, inherited formation, fear, desire for belonging, and the pressure of enormous stakes. A "free" choice made under these conditions is not obviously the kind of choice that can justify irreversible ruin. The burden of proof is extreme, and most formulations do not meet it.

There is also the question of rehabilitation. Human punishment, where decent, is constrained by the possibility that persons can change. Even severe sanctions usually carry an implicit or explicit horizon of return. Hell, by contrast, often functions as the abolition of moral future. It freezes a finite history into an eternal verdict. This appears less like justice than like metaphysical retribution without remainder. A legitimacy framework should view such finality with suspicion. A ruler who abandons rehabilitation entirely reveals something about the ruler, not only about the condemned.

The problem is not limited to hell. Any doctrine of divine punishment must face the issue of asymmetry between the ruler's power and the creature's fragility. An all-powerful being has endless resources for correction, education, healing, and transformation. If such a being settles instead on irrevocable loss, one must ask why restorative alternatives were not pursued to completion. Appeals to freedom can answer some of this, but not all. Freedom is not negated by every form of rescue. We intervene to stop suicides, prevent children from catastrophic self-harm, and block crimes without thinking freedom thereby worthless. The line between respecting agency and abandoning it is morally delicate. Theological punishment often treats that line too crudely.

A further issue concerns the use of fear in securing obedience. If divine rule is backed by the threat of overwhelming harm, then the legitimacy of obedience becomes clouded. One may comply prudentially without endorsing the ruler's right. This is true in politics and no less true in theology. "Obey or suffer terribly" may be effective. It does not by itself establish justice. In fact the more catastrophic the threat, the easier it is for obedience to appear coerced rather than morally meaningful.

What would a proportionate divine justice look like? At minimum, it would be intelligible, discriminating, restorative where possible, calibrated to actual moral agency, and sensitive to epistemic conditions. It would distinguish malicious cruelty from sincere error, entrenched exploitation from inherited confusion, deliberate contempt from wounded incapacity. It would not attach maximal consequence to ambiguous choices under hidden conditions. It would not allow the architecture of punishment to exceed the architecture of comprehension. Most importantly, it would reveal a ruler more interested in healing persons than in vindicating status.

The point, then, is not that wrongdoing should carry no consequence. It is that authority discloses itself in the form of its justice. A ruler who punishes disproportionately, irreversibly, or under opaque laws does not become more legitimate by being cosmic. Greatness increases responsibility. It does not excuse excess. If divine punishment outruns the standards by which any serious political theory distinguishes justice from cruelty, then the problem is not merely doctrinal embarrassment. It is a failure of legitimacy.

Part IV. World, Suffering, and Competence

Here the framework confronts the governed world itself: suffering, mortality, natural order, and rival metaphysical models. The issue is whether the structure of existence bears the marks of a rule that could claim moral legitimacy over finite persons.

16. Suffering, Nature, and the Competence Problem

Debates about evil are often framed as tests of God's existence or goodness. The jurisdictional approach does not need to resolve those vast questions in full, but it does force a related inquiry. What does the structure of suffering suggest about the competence, priorities, and justificatory burden of any alleged cosmic governor? Once the issue is framed this way, familiar observations about natural evil acquire a sharper political meaning.

Human beings live in a world whose architecture includes not only beauty, intelligibility, tenderness, and astonishing forms of cooperation, but also predation, disease, deformity, disaster, random injury, and forms of pain that seem gratuitous from any creature-centered standpoint. Children die before moral agency matures. Parasites blind and consume hosts. Earthquakes bury those who neither caused nor could foresee them. Neurological disorders can fracture the very capacities through which responsibility is ordinarily assigned. These are not simply episodes within human wickedness. They are features of the broader order within which moral life takes place.

If a theological system claims that the same sovereign who governs conscience also governs nature, then the design, permission, or sustenance of these structures is relevant to legitimacy. This does not mean that every pain is decisive evidence against God. It means something more targeted: a ruler whose domain systematically exposes subjects to immense, uneven, and often non-instrumental suffering bears a heavier burden to explain why such governance still merits trust and obedience. Goodness may survive tragedy. Legitimacy, however, requires more than mere survival of concept. It requires that the governed have some reason to regard the order as answerable to their moral standing rather than indifferent to it.

One traditional response is that suffering is pedagogical.[5] Hardship deepens character, refines compassion, awakens dependence, and discloses spiritual truths that ease and comfort conceal. There is truth in the thought that some suffering can be meaningful. The disciplines of care, courage, patience, and solidarity often arise under pressure. But this defense becomes morally unstable when generalized. To say that all suffering contributes to soul-making is to speak too quickly over the actual distribution and intensity of pain. Some suffering crushes rather than educates. Some destroys personality before growth is possible. Some arrives so early or so absolutely that the goods allegedly produced are inaccessible to the sufferer. It is not enough to point out that adversity can mature a person. One must ask whether the world's most devastating forms of misery are proportionate, necessary, and fairly distributed if their function is moral education. Much of the evidence suggests otherwise.

A second response appeals to regularity. A stable natural order, it is said, is a precondition for rational agency. The same tectonic processes that make a habitable planet possible also produce earthquakes. The same biological structures that permit life create vulnerability to disease. Miraculous intervention at every point of suffering would render the world chaotic, destroy lawlike order, and make moral action impossible. This is a powerful line of thought because it identifies a real tension between a perfectly padded world and a meaningful one. A world in which no one could be injured might also be a world in which action had no significance.

Yet even this defense does not remove the competence problem. The issue is not whether some risk is necessary for a finite and law-governed world. The issue is whether the actual scale, concentration, and cruelty of suffering look like the minimally necessary cost of meaningful freedom or like a distribution far harsher than such a justification can bear. One need not demand a world without all pain in order to question a world with childhood bone cancer, degenerative neurological torment, famine on a planetary scale, and evolutionary pathways built through eons of predation and terror. The contrast is not between perfection and reality. It is between what appears necessary for creaturely seriousness and what appears excessive by any ordinary moral measure.

Here the jurisdictional standpoint introduces a useful distinction between goodness and office. Even if one believed that God had reasons beyond human grasp for permitting such a world, the political question would remain whether a ruler who cannot make those reasons sufficiently intelligible can demand trust as a matter of obligation. In human governance, "I have excellent reasons that you cannot understand and therefore must obey" is not a satisfying reply, especially when the costs are borne overwhelmingly by the vulnerable. It may be true on occasion that citizens lack access to all relevant information. But when opacity and suffering combine at scale, the legitimacy deficit widens rather than narrows.

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[5] Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Cornell, 1999) offers the most serious recent theodicy, arguing that divine goodness requires not merely that goods outweigh evils in aggregate but that each individual life be redeemed in a way that makes participation in horrors worth it from *that person's* perspective. The competence problem survives even this account because it asks not whether redemption is imaginable but whether a perfectly competent designer would have required such horrors as the path to it.

The competence problem is therefore not a simple accusation that the ruler is wicked. It is a demand for proportion between alleged ends and visible means. If the cosmic order is a moral school, why are so many lessons taught through devastation that annihilates the student? If it is a theater of freedom, why is freedom so unevenly distributed across bodies, histories, and psychologies? If it is a preparation for eternity, why is the preparatory field so distorted by accident, trauma, and inherited disadvantage? If it is a just order, why do natural harms so often ignore agency altogether?

The problem becomes sharper when paired with doctrines of judgment. A subject shaped by abuse, malnutrition, illness, war, or shattered cognition is not situated like a well-supported and psychologically stable subject. Contemporary moral and legal thought recognizes this. We do not evaluate responsibility in abstraction from background conditions. Coercion, capacity, trauma, and ignorance matter. But theological systems often retain a rhetoric of universal responsibility while under-theorizing these radical differences in circumstance. That gap is not merely an abstract defect. It is a question of fairness written into the structure of salvation, condemnation, guilt, and obligation.

There is also a deep asymmetry in who bears the costs. Theodicies are often articulated by those contemplating suffering rather than undergoing its worst forms. This does not invalidate them, but it should induce caution. Any framework that asks creatures to trust the justice of a system in which many subjects are broken beyond any discernible compensating good owes those creatures more than elegant possibility. It owes them an account commensurate with the moral seriousness of what they endure. Otherwise reverence risks becoming a discipline of reinterpretation imposed on the wounded by the comparatively fortunate.

One might say, finally, that no finite perspective can judge the whole. That may be so. But jurisdictional sovereignty does not require omniscient condemnation. It requires only the refusal to infer legitimacy from power under conditions where the visible order contains levels of suffering that would, in any human system, trigger intense suspicion of the governing arrangement. If a state subjected citizens to arbitrary disaster, childhood agony, and opaque standards of responsibility while asking them to trust that all was wise beyond their understanding, we would not call skepticism arrogant. We would call it morally awake.

The competence problem thus names a tension between the moral standing of creatures and the structure of the world they inhabit. It does not conclude that no ruler exists. It concludes that the ruler’s claim to trust, obedience, and moral supremacy is not vindicated by the mere fact that a world exists at all. The world’s beauty is real, but so is its cruelty. Any authority claiming credit for the former must also answer for the latter. Until that answer becomes publicly adequate, the right to rule remains unproven.

17. Engineering Malpractice and the Grammar of Preventable Harm

The problem of evil is often argued at such altitude that its most morally intelligible features disappear. Philosophers debate logical consistency, probabilistic expectations, skeptical theism, greater goods, and modal possibility. These discussions have value. But they can abstract suffering into a chessboard. Omittoism introduces a more forensic phrase—engineering malpractice—not to trivialize metaphysics, but to restore moral texture. The phrase asks us to evaluate recurrent forms of preventable harm by analogy with domains where competence and care are already intelligible.

When a surgeon leaves an instrument inside a patient, when an architect ignores a fatal stress point, when a pilot flies with known defects, or when an engineer signs off on a bridge whose foreseeable failure kills innocents, we do not respond by saying that the system as a whole may have hidden benefits. We ask whether the harm was avoidable, whether the standards of competence were met, whether those exposed consented to the risk, and whether the one responsible had reasons proportionate to the danger imposed. The idea of malpractice names not every bad outcome, but a pattern of failure relative to role, knowledge, and preventability.

Applied cosmically, the concept does not assume that a creator must build a toy world free of all pain. It asks instead whether the actual distribution and texture of suffering are what one should expect under perfect competence joined to perfect concern for the governed. The question becomes sharper when the harms are not merely the price of embodiment, but involve vast excess: infants dying before language, creatures consumed alive in systems of predation, minds collapsing into dementia, random congenital agony, mass vulnerability to disaster, the staggering waste of sentient life across evolutionary and historical time. One need not prove that every instance is gratuitous in an absolute sense. One need only note that a governance model appealing to maximal wisdom carries a maximal explanatory burden.

Critics may object that the analogy is anthropomorphic. Cosmic creation is not bridge design. True. But analogies are warranted precisely where the language of goodness and wisdom is meant to remain meaningful. If theology wishes to call the creator benevolent and competent in a sense that matters to creatures, then some recognizable relation must hold between avoidable suffering and the evaluation of governance. Otherwise the terms lose traction. A goodness untouched by the forms of vulnerability that dominate creaturely life begins to look like a title detached from its subject matter.

The phrase engineering malpractice also shifts emphasis from private anguish to public standards. The problem is not simply that suffering hurts. The deeper question is what sort of order permits it and under what justification. Preventable harm becomes politically salient when those exposed never agreed to the structure and cannot appeal beyond it. In human systems, malpractice is condemned partly because asymmetry intensifies duty: the more expertise and control one possesses, the less excuse one has for reckless exposure. If perfect power exists, the excuse threshold falls to zero.

A standard reply invokes greater goods. Perhaps some harms are necessary for courage, soul-making, stable law, free agency, or the existence of an interesting world. Omittoism does not dismiss this out of hand. It asks for discrimination. Which harms are plausibly connected to irreplaceable goods, and which appear as surplus devastation? Courage may require danger, but not every disease. Agency may require uncertainty, but not every child's agony. Regular law may require tectonics, but the moral question remains whether a wiser design could have secured the same goods with less catastrophic exposure. Appeals to necessity too often function as bulk waivers rather than precise explanations.

Another reply says that creatures lack the vantage point to judge. This introduces a serious epistemic point, but it cuts both ways. If our standpoint is too limited to identify malpractice, it is also too limited to confidently identify hidden benevolence in the very cases under dispute. Skeptical modesty cannot asymmetrically protect only the positive verdict. The framework therefore uses the concept of malpractice not as a dogmatic proof, but as a disciplined defeater of easy theological confidence. It keeps before us the simple thought that if a world looks, at scale, like a system with severe preventable failures, then the burden is not on the sufferer to explain why they should ignore appearances.

The concept is also morally important because it resists sacralization of harm. Many traditions convert suffering into pedagogy, punishment, purification, or providential placement. Sometimes this may console; often it also anesthetizes outrage that should remain awake. Engineering malpractice restores a language in which some horrors are not ennobled by being woven into metaphysical narrative. They remain signs that governance, if governance there is, has not yet justified itself.

To speak this way is not to deny the resilience of those who suffer, nor the beauty humans sometimes build under terrible conditions. It is to refuse the inference from salvageability to legitimacy. That people can make meaning from wounds does not prove the wounds were rightly given. A world may contain heroism and still stand accused. The grammar of preventable harm keeps this distinction clear, and that clarity is one of the most ethically serious contributions Omittoism can make to the theology of suffering.

18. Mortality, Finitude, and the Ethics of Exposure

A philosophical anthropology that begins at birth must also end at death. Mortality is not an incidental detail added to otherwise neutral existence. It shapes the meaning of every command, every promise, every fear, and every appeal to obedience. Finite beings do not deliberate from nowhere. They deliberate under the pressure of loss, scarcity, decay, and the irreversible passing of time. Any system that claims authority over such beings must therefore be judged partly by how it structures exposure to mortality and how it interprets the significance of death.

Many theological worldviews soften mortality by embedding it in a larger narrative. Death becomes transition, test, purification, judgment, return, or defeat. These narratives can console, and sometimes genuinely ennoble. But they can also obscure the distributive fact of exposure. Some die in peace, some in terror; some after long flourishing, some before language; some under care, some abandoned; some after rich opportunity, some beneath machinery, plague, war, or preventable neglect. If all of this occurs within a system governed by perfect wisdom and power, then mortality cannot be treated as a neutral background. It becomes part of the administrative shape of the world.

Omittoism does not deny that finite life can contain beauty. Nor does it assume that immortality would automatically be superior. The point is narrower. To introduce persons into a mortal condition is to expose them to unavoidable harms that they did not choose. The ethical question is whether this exposure is justifiable simply by appeal to goods later extracted from it. Here a familiar moral intuition returns: one does not normally gain the right to endanger another merely because one predicts the danger may deepen their character or produce compensating beauty. Ends matter, but the permissibility of exposing persons to severe risk without consent remains contested even in far smaller cases.

Theological replies often say that mortality is the condition of meaningful freedom, finite goods, or creaturely existence itself. Perhaps. But this answer still requires discrimination. Which forms of finitude are necessary for agency, and which exceed that necessity? Which deaths belong to the structure of organic life, and which reflect gratuitous excess? Which vulnerabilities are the cost of embodiment, and which look more like design permissiveness toward vast preventable suffering? Once the issue is framed this way, mortality divides into layers rather than remaining a single sacralized datum.

The ethics of exposure asks us to hold two ideas together. First, not all vulnerability is objectionable; a world without any exposure might also be a world without depth, dependence, courage, or attachment. Second, exposure still requires justification when it becomes severe, uneven, and imposed. Human institutions understand this intuitively. We permit risk where it is transparent, shareable, revisable, and tethered to goods that cannot be secured otherwise. We condemn risk where people are conscripted into danger without notice, where benefits accrue elsewhere, or where those exposed had no meaningful chance to refuse. A cosmic system should not be evaluated by weaker standards than a research ethics board.

Mortality also changes the psychology of obedience. Finite beings are more governable when they fear extinction, judgment, abandonment, or meaningless loss. The existential weight of death can make authority appear necessary even when authority has not been justified. It can lure the mind toward paternal metaphysics: better an austere ruler than an indifferent abyss. There is understandable pathos in this move. Yet philosophy must ask whether the wish for a moralized death is functioning as evidence or as compensation. The need for death to mean something cannot itself authorize the system that promises meaning.

There is an inverse possibility too. A sober acceptance of mortality can release the demand that the universe operate as a compensatory courtroom. Once death is no longer

imagined as the final administrative checkpoint of an unseen regime, life may appear both smaller and more precious. Responsibility intensifies because time is finite. Care deepens because no supernatural surplus guarantees repair. Mourning becomes heavier because losses are not rhetorically diluted by easy narrative. But gratitude can also become cleaner because existence is not treated as a managed probation whose every joy arrives attached to hidden leverage.

The ethics of exposure therefore leads to a difficult but fruitful distinction. To be finite is not yet to be ruled. Mortality can be a condition of life without constituting a title to command. Even if death belongs unavoidably to organic existence, it does not follow that those exposed to it owe worship, surrender, or uncritical allegiance to the source of the order in which it occurs. Indeed, precisely because mortality is so weighty, it intensifies the duty of any alleged ruler to show competence, fairness, and communicative clarity.

In this sense, death sharpens rather than dissolves the audit. It removes sentimental shortcuts. It asks whether ultimate authority speaks honestly to finite beings, whether it burdens them fairly, whether it uses fear as pressure, and whether it can justify an order in which the terms of participation are never chosen and always ending. A philosophy serious about mortality is not one that finds death comforting. It is one that refuses to let death's terror smuggle authority past review.

19. Science, Nature, and the Administrative Image of the Cosmos

Modern science does not settle the question of divine authority, but it changes the atmosphere in which the question is asked. The world described by contemporary inquiry is lawful without being morally legible, intricate without advertising intention, and often indifferent to the scale of human concern. Evolution works through waste as well as adaptation. Physics describes order but not policy. Neuroscience situates consciousness in vulnerable biological systems. Cosmology places humanity in a universe whose size destabilizes inherited intuitions about centrality. None of this disproves transcendence. What it does undermine is the easy picture of nature as self-evident moral administration.

That matters because many theological claims about legitimacy depend not on revelation alone but on the interpretive use of nature. The order of the world is said to show wisdom, benevolence, hierarchy, purposiveness, or rightful dependence. Yet the more closely nature is studied, the more it looks like a domain in which beauty and brutality, elegance and indifference, coexist without obvious regard for our moral categories. Teeth, parasites, extinction events, developmental errors, predation, dementia, famine, and ecological collapse do not read like a transparent civic code. If they are part of a perfectly governed order, then the governance is not morally legible at the scale where creatures actually live.

Omittoism therefore resists two equal mistakes. The first is pre-modern sacral naivety: the assumption that because nature is ordered, it is morally justified and politically exemplary. The second is scientistic overreach: the assumption that because science explains mechanisms, all normative questions are dissolved. The correct conclusion is narrower and more useful. Science widens the evidential field while refusing to close the normative one. It shows us what sort of world we inhabit more clearly than our ancestors could. That clarity matters when evaluating competence, exposure, and claims about what a perfectly good designer would likely permit.

The administrative image of the cosmos is a useful expression here. Many religions implicitly present the world as an administered moral environment, even when they avoid bureaucratic language. Events carry lessons, sufferings have hidden placement, commands are embedded in order, and histories converge under guidance. But science repeatedly pressures this picture. Diseases follow biological pathways rather than deserts. Earthquakes respond to tectonics rather than virtue. Evolution does not privilege innocence. Weather does not sort populations by piety. The more this becomes obvious, the less plausible it is to treat ordinary natural order as a legible transcript of moral government.

This does not mean the universe is meaningless. It means meaning cannot be read off nature as though the cosmos were issuing plainly formatted directives. Human beings still find orientation through inquiry, solidarity, art, law, memory, and ethical construction. What science subtracts is the cheap confidence that because there is regularity there is already legitimate rule. Regularity may indicate structure. It does not, by itself, indicate moral title.

There is a positive contribution as well. Science disciplines projection. It repeatedly teaches that human intuitions about design, centrality, purpose, and agency are unreliable when extrapolated too quickly. The stars do not revolve for us. Species are not arranged for our metaphysical comfort. Minds are embodied and fragile. The natural world is astonishing, but astonishment is not deference. This chastening of anthropocentrism can actually aid philosophical seriousness. It prevents the desire for significance from over-reading the data.

At the same time, scientific understanding strengthens the bio-social alternative proposed by Omittoism. The more we understand dependence, vulnerability, cognition, development, and ecological interconnection, the less plausible it becomes to ground ethics primarily in inaccessible divine command. We can see directly that creatures capable of suffering require institutions of care; that cooperation is not sentimental but civilizationally necessary; that human flourishing depends on norms protecting bodies, voices, trust, and social infrastructures. Science does not generate value from nothing. But it illuminates the conditions under which values become urgent, intelligible, and publicly shareable.

This yields a disciplined posture toward metaphysics. One may still believe that nature is created, sustained, or symbolically translucent. The point is that such belief cannot simply piggyback on precritical readings of order. It must now coexist with the fact that the world, as it presents itself to inquiry, is structurally mixed and morally opaque. That opacity feeds the jurisdictional case. A ruler who wishes the governed to infer justice from administration has not chosen the clearest medium.

In the end, science neither crowns nor dethrones a deity. What it does is strip away a set of lazy transitions: from order to benevolence, from complexity to rightful command, from lawfulness to moral title, from survival to approval. Once those transitions are blocked, the authority question becomes sharper. The cosmos may be magnificent. It may even be authored. But magnificence is not legitimacy, authorship is not jurisdiction, and explanation is not obedience.

20. The Strongest Theological Reply: Thomism and the Juridical Cleavage

The most sophisticated answer to the critique developed so far does not simply insist that God is more powerful than human rulers.[6] It argues instead that the very categories of political legitimacy misdescribe the divine-human relation. On the Thomistic picture, God is not merely one powerful being among others issuing external commands. God is the source of being itself. Creatures do not stand over against God as citizens against a state. They participate in an order constitutive of their own nature. Divine law, on this view, is not primarily an external imposition but the rational structure of created flourishing. If that is right, then the language of consent may be misplaced from the beginning.

This is the strongest challenge the present framework faces, and it should be treated as such. Thomism has several virtues here. It avoids the crudity of voluntarism, according to which things are right simply because God commands them. It resists the picture of God as arbitrary sovereign. It grounds moral order in the nature of reality and the teleology of beings rather than in sheer will. Under this picture, to obey God is not to submit to alien rule but to live in accordance with what one most deeply is.

The force of the challenge may be stated sharply. If divine normativity is constitutive rather than externally legislative, then the critique of non-consensual rule loses its target. One does not “consent” to logic, truth, or the conditions of one’s own flourishing. These are not authorities that stand over against the self; they are structures within which rational life becomes possible. If God is related to creatures more like the ground of intelligibility than like a political governor, then asking whether God has the “right to rule” may be like asking whether arithmetic has the right to constrain mathematics.

The Thomistic challenge deserves a serious concession. If divine authority were wholly reducible to the constitutive structure of rational flourishing, then much of the political critique would indeed miss its mark. But this concession opens a dilemma. For most religious traditions do not treat God merely as the metaphysical condition of intelligibility.

[6] For the strongest contemporary statement of Thomistic natural law against voluntarism, see Edward Feser, *Aquinas* (Oneworld, 2009), ch. 5, and Brian Davies, *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil* (Continuum, 2006). Davies's crucial move — that God is not a moral agent in the ordinary sense and therefore not subject to moral evaluation — is precisely the position the juridical cleavage argument is designed to pressure.

They also speak of command, judgment, obedience, sin, reward, punishment, covenant, worship, and rebellion. These are irreducibly juridical and second-personal categories. They depict not merely the structure of flourishing but a ruler who addresses subjects, evaluates them, and binds them.

Here the argument reaches what may be called the juridical cleavage. Either divine normativity is genuinely constitutive of rational nature, or it is genuinely juridical in the sense of involving command and judgment. If it is constitutive, then it resembles logic, teleology, or the conditions of flourishing more than political rule. In that case, the language of obedience becomes metaphorical, and many traditional doctrines of sin, punishment, and sovereignty require re-description. The theological gain is that consent may no longer be relevant. The theological cost is that God's "authority" ceases to look like authority in the ordinary sense.

If, on the other hand, divine authority is genuinely juridical—if God commands, judges, and punishes as ruler rather than merely grounding the structure of flourishing—then the relation is once again one in which one will claims jurisdiction over another. In that case, the demand for legitimacy returns with full force. One cannot have a genuine command relation while declaring it immune to the standards attached to command. The Thomist must therefore choose which aspect is doing the real work, or explain how both coexist without contradiction.

The most sophisticated theological reply does not say merely that God made creatures and may therefore command them. It says something subtler: that creatures possess no intelligible good apart from the end for which they were made, and that divine rule is therefore not foreign imposition but the truthful articulation of their own flourishing. This is stronger than voluntarism, but it still leaves the jurisdictional problem unresolved. For the decisive question is not whether a creator knows the good of a creature better than the creature does, but whether knowledge of a creature's good automatically confers sovereign title over that creature's will. A physician may know what health requires without thereby owning the patient. A teacher may know what intellectual discipline requires without thereby acquiring permanent jurisdiction over the student's conscience. Teleology can explain what fulfills a being; it does not by itself explain why the source of that teleology may demand worship, punish dissent, or claim comprehensive obedience. Indeed, once flourishing is made central, the burden on authority grows rather than shrinks. If divine rule is justified because it perfects the creature, then every feature of the order—hiddenness, coercive stakes, inherited confusion, unequal access to truth, terror of punishment, and the historical mediation of revelation—must be shown to serve flourishing in a way consistent with the dignity of rational agency. Otherwise teleology becomes a refined vocabulary for paternal domination rather than a vindication of legitimate rule.

Some Thomists attempt exactly that coexistence by appealing to free participation in the eternal law. Human beings are constituted for the good, yet free to deviate from it. Sin is not simply disagreement with an external sovereign but damage to one's own nature. This is elegant, but instability remains. If deviation is primarily self-corruption, then the central

relation is between the agent and the good, not between subject and ruler. The moral issue becomes therapeutic and teleological before it becomes juridical. The more persuasive this picture becomes, the less room remains for the rhetoric of sovereignty. God appears less as governor and more as the horizon of flourishing.

Alternatively, if the rhetoric of sovereignty remains literal—if one must obey because God commands and may justly punish disobedience—then the teleological picture has not escaped the political problem. It has only deepened it by making the ruler also the architect of the nature under which the subjects must live. In that case, the birth problem and proportionality problem return intensified. The creator designed the structure, made the agents vulnerable within it, and now claims the right to judge them under terms they did not choose.

One may see the cleavage through a simpler analogy. Suppose a physician explains that health consists in alignment with the body's proper functioning. The physician has epistemic authority, perhaps even great expertise, but not sovereignty. The patient may have prudential reason to follow advice because the advice tracks flourishing. Now suppose the physician says, "Because I understand health best, you owe me obedience as such, and I may justly punish you for departure from my guidance." Something new has entered. Expertise has become jurisdiction. The move is not automatic. A further argument is needed. Likewise with God. If divine wisdom tracks flourishing, that may ground reasons for deference. It does not automatically ground the right to rule.

The deeper issue can now be stated with greater precision. Classical theology often succeeds in showing that God, if real, is not merely a larger version of a human ruler. God may be the source of intelligibility, the ground of being, the final cause of rational creatures, and the horizon within which all finite goods become possible. But none of this, even if granted, yet yields jurisdiction in the strict sense. It may show why reality is ordered, why flourishing has a shape, why reason is not lawless, and why the good is not a private invention. It does not yet show why one will is thereby entitled to stand over another as ruler, claimant, judge, and rightful recipient of obedience. This is where the old Euthyphro problem quietly returns in a more political register. The classic dilemma asks whether the good is good because God wills it or whether God wills it because it is good. The present argument asks a parallel but sharper question: is divine authority legitimate because God is metaphysically ultimate, or does metaphysical ultimacy still require a separately intelligible account of legitimate authority? The distinction matters because ontology and jurisdiction are not the same category.

A being may ground the existence of all things without thereby possessing political title over all persons. A being may even ground moral truth without thereby converting moral truth into a personal right to command. Theology often compresses these layers into one movement: God is ultimate, therefore God is good; God is good, therefore God knows our end; God knows our end, therefore obedience is owed. But the final step is precisely the one under dispute. To know the structure of flourishing is one thing. To possess the right to command another conscious being under threat of guilt, punishment, or exclusion is another.

The difference is not verbal. It is the difference between second-order truth and second-personal authority. Arithmetic constrains mathematics, but arithmetic does not rule mathematicians. Biological facts constrain health, but they do not by themselves authorize physicians to punish patients for irrational living. A map of flourishing, however accurate, is not yet a throne.

If Thomism means that God is related to creatures as the constitutive source of their good, then the language of sovereignty becomes increasingly metaphorical. Sin becomes misalignment before it becomes rebellion; judgment becomes diagnosis before it becomes sentencing; salvation becomes healing before it becomes political pardon. That model is morally more attractive, but it also concedes much of the present critique, because it dissolves rule into order. If, however, theology insists on preserving the full juridical grammar of command, obedience, guilt, worship, judgment, and sanction, then the demand for legitimacy returns in full force. One cannot indefinitely shelter behind metaphysical subtlety while retaining the coercive consequences of sovereignty. Ultimacy may explain dependence. It does not automatically contain title. And unless title can be shown rather than inferred, the distance between divine orientation and divine rule remains morally decisive.

There is, however, a more generous way to read the Thomistic challenge. It may be understood as revealing that much of what religion should be concerned with is not sovereignty at all but participation in reality, growth toward the good, and the healing of distorted desire. If so, the present critique performs a useful purification. It pressures theology to relinquish its most authoritarian residues and distinguish more carefully between metaphysical orientation and political domination. On this reading, the critique is not anti-theological. It is anti-imperial.

One theological tradition largely escapes the competence objection outlined in Chapters 15–17, and intellectual honesty requires its acknowledgment here. Process theology, developed from Whitehead's *Process and Reality* (1929) and extended by Charles Hartshorne, denies that God is omnipotent in the classical sense. On this view, God does not *permit* suffering by withholding preventive power; God genuinely *cannot* override the self-creative agency of finite occasions of experience. The suffering of the world is therefore not evidence of divine negligence but of the metaphysical cost of a world in which freedom is real at every level of reality. This is a serious position. It deflects the engineering malpractice argument and the competence problem almost entirely. Yet it does so at a high theological cost: a God who cannot prevent childhood cancer is not the God of most canonical traditions, and the jurisdictional question transforms rather than disappears. One must now ask whether a finite, persuasive, non-coercive divine reality can generate the authority claims — worship, obedience, judgment, ultimate sanction — that classical traditions assert. On process terms, those claims become very difficult to sustain, which suggests that process theology, pursued honestly, reaches a conclusion structurally similar to the present framework by a different route: something worthy of reverence may exist, but *rule* in the political sense becomes nearly unintelligible.

Still, where traditions continue to insist on divine kingship, final judgment, obligatory worship, and eternal sanction, the juridical cleavage remains decisive. They cannot indefinitely shelter behind metaphysical subtlety while preserving the practical grammar of command. Either divine authority is not really political, in which case the critique has done its work by stripping away coercive sovereignty, or it is political enough to bind, judge, and punish, in which case legitimacy must still be earned. The Thomistic challenge therefore sharpens rather than dissolves the central question. It shows exactly where the argument must be won.

21. Rival Models of Divine Authority: Command, Nature, Love, and the Ground of Being

The critique developed in this essay is strongest when it addresses not caricatures but the most refined available models of divine authority. Theological traditions do not speak with one voice. Some describe God primarily as commander, others as source of being, others as perfect goodness, others as love itself, others as the telos of rational nature. A mature jurisdictional argument must therefore distinguish these models rather than treating them as interchangeable.

The most direct target is voluntarist command theory. On this view moral obligation arises because God wills or commands certain actions. The attraction of the model is obvious. It promises decisive normativity. The ruler's authority is built into the structure of obligation. But its difficulties are equally obvious. Unless constrained by independent standards of goodness, it risks collapsing into a sanctified might-makes-right. If the commands are good because God commands them, then goodness becomes hostage to authority. If God commands them because they are independently good, then authority no longer explains the goodness and must face the question of why command adds anything beyond promulgation. Jurisdictional sovereignty presses hardest here because command theory makes political jurisdiction explicit. It therefore inherits the full burden of consent, accountability, clarity, and proportionality.

A second family of views relocates authority into nature rather than command. Thomistic and natural law traditions argue that God's relation to creatures is not principally that of sovereign to subject but of source to form. Rational beings are constituted with an orientation toward goods that perfect them. Divine law is then not an external imposition but the intelligible order of flourishing itself. This model avoids some problems of voluntarism, particularly arbitrariness. Yet it faces what may be called the juridical cleavage. If the divine relation is truly constitutive rather than political, then the language of command, judgment, reward, and punishment begins to look metaphorical or secondary. But much actual religion insists on those political features. If, conversely, the political features remain literal and

central, then the model has not escaped the need to justify jurisdiction over distinct agents. It hovers between metaphysical description and genuine rule.

A third model identifies God with perfect goodness. Here the thought is not simply that God issues right commands, but that God is the supreme good toward which all desire, morality, and reality converge. The appeal of this model is profound. It seems to align obedience with flourishing and to transfigure submission into participation in the good. Yet even here an ambiguity remains. The fact that some reality is the highest good does not by itself imply that it possesses political authority. Truth is a good. Beauty is a good. Friendship is a good. We may owe them regard, cultivation, and responsiveness. But they do not rule us in the legislative sense. To say that God is the highest good may explain why creatures ought to love God, contemplate God, or align themselves with the good. It does not automatically explain why God thereby acquires jurisdiction to command under threat of punishment. Again the move from value to office requires argument.

A fourth model centers love. God is not best understood as monarch or legislator but as the source and fulfillment of relational communion. Worship is fitting because love is fitting. Sin is alienation. Judgment is the exposure of reality rather than the imposition of external penalty. This model often presents itself as an alternative to authoritarian theology, and in many respects it is. Yet once love becomes demanded, the problem returns. Love can invite, beckon, and transform; it cannot, without contradiction, compel in the morally richest sense. The more a theology emphasizes love, the more difficult it becomes to reconcile that love with structures of fear, non-consensual dependence, and ultimate sanction. The language of love may soften the image of rule, but if refusal still carries catastrophic consequence, the jurisdictional question survives beneath the vocabulary of intimacy.

Finally, there are ground-of-being approaches. On these views God is not one being among others issuing instructions from above but the very condition of there being anything at all. The creature does not stand over against God as against a sovereign but exists only by continuous participation in the source of being. This perspective can be philosophically sophisticated and spiritually compelling. But its political implications are frequently overstated. Dependence on the ground of being may be metaphysically unavoidable. It does not follow that dependence generates political allegiance. We are dependent on logic, causality, embodiment, and time. Those conditions shape us utterly, yet they are not rulers. If theology transforms ontological dependence into normative sovereignty, it must still explain the bridge.

What these models show is that theological sophistication often changes the form of the problem rather than dissolving it. The more divine authority is made analogical, constitutive, or relational, the less obvious it becomes that the word “authority” should retain its political meaning. But the more theology preserves the political meaning—command, law, obedience, punishment, reward—the more exposed it becomes to the audit this essay undertakes. The traditions often want both: God is not merely a ruler like earthly rulers, yet God really does rule and deserves obedience of the strongest kind. Jurisdictional sovereignty asks them to choose their register more carefully.

There is an important constructive lesson here. Not every religious picture need be rejected equally. A theology that abandons coercive jurisdiction, gives up the moralization of fear, treats revelation as invitation rather than legislation, renounces eternal punishment, and understands divine-human relation primarily through the language of truth, beauty, and freely awakened love may evade large parts of the critique. Such a view would still face metaphysical and ethical questions, but it would no longer ask creatures to legitimate an unchosen sovereign power. In effect, it would cease to be a strong doctrine of divine rule and become something closer to a philosophy of ultimate orientation.

This suggests that jurisdictional sovereignty is not simply anti-religious. It is selectively anti-authoritarian. It distinguishes forms of religion that sanctify comprehensive and unchosen authority from forms that cultivate reverence without domination. The distinction is philosophically important because it prevents the critique from hardening into a crude opposition between "religion" and "freedom." The real issue is whether ultimacy is being presented as that which calls, illuminates, and transforms, or as that which legislates over conscience by right of origin, power, or metaphysical necessity.

Still, many canonical traditions do retain the stronger claim. They do not merely say that God is the supreme good. They say God is Lord. They do not merely say that God draws creatures toward fulfillment. They say God has the right to command them. They do not merely say that estrangement from God is tragic. They say disobedience is culpable before an ultimate tribunal. Where these stronger claims remain, so does the argument of this essay. However exalted the metaphysics, however tender the language, the political core must still answer the political question: by what right?

Part V. Ethics, Politics, and Human Life

The fifth movement turns constructive. If divine legislation is not the basis of legitimacy, how should ethics, politics, character, community, and meaningful life be understood? This part argues for a post-sovereign moral seriousness rather than a collapse into relativism or nihilism.

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22. The Authority Question Beyond the West: Kalām, Dharma, and the Non-Theistic Alternative

The inquiry conducted in the preceding chapters has drawn almost exclusively on Western theological and philosophical sources. The interlocutors have been Aquinas, Scotus, Ockham, Hume, Kant, and their contemporary heirs. The objections have been formulated within the idiom of analytic philosophy of religion. This is understandable; the framework was developed in part as a response to problems native to that tradition. But the ambition of Omittoism is not limited to Western theism. It claims that wherever

authority over rational agents is asserted on the basis of creation, power, or ontological superiority, the legitimacy question arises. That claim requires engagement beyond its own genealogy.

What follows examines the authority question as it appears — in different vocabulary and with different emphases — in Islamic kalām, Hindu philosophical theology, and Buddhist non-theism. The purpose is not to construct a survey of world religion but to show that the jurisdictional question has not been a Western eccentricity. It arose independently, was debated with sophistication, and produced results that both strengthen and complicate the framework developed here. Where the traditions confirm the framework, the confirmation is genuine. Where they challenge it, the challenge deserves honest acknowledgment.

The most direct structural parallel to Omittoism's central concern in non-Western thought occurs in early Islamic theology, specifically in the sustained dispute between the Ash'ariyya and the Mu'tazila over the nature of divine justice and the ground of moral obligation. This dispute is, at its core, a debate about exactly the question that organizes the present essay: whether divine authority is subject to independent evaluative standards, or whether goodness is simply whatever the ruler determines.

The Mu'tazilite theologians, flourishing in the intellectual centres of Baghdad and Basra between the eighth and tenth centuries CE, developed one of the most philosophically rigorous accounts of divine justice in any religious tradition. For the Mu'tazila, God is necessarily just — not because justice is whatever God wills, but because justice is an independent standard that God's nature reliably meets and could not, by definition, violate. This means that moral predicates applied to God retain genuine evaluative content: to call God just is to say something that could, in principle, be false if the evidence ran in the other direction. The Mu'tazila insisted on God's obligation to do what is best for creation (al-aslah), to reward good and punish evil in proportion to desert, and never to impose obligations on persons that exceed their actual capacity to discharge them.

The convergence with the jurisdictional framework is immediate. The Mu'tazilite demand for evaluable divine justice — for goodness that is not merely a synonym for divine will — anticipates the present argument that moral predicates used to praise divine rule must retain enough continuity with creaturely evaluative life to function as genuine assessment rather than applause. The Mu'tazilite principle that God cannot impose obligations beyond capacity directly anticipates the proportionality concerns raised in Chapters 14 and 15. Their insistence on intelligible divine reasons, accessible to rational inquiry rather than sheltered behind pure will, anticipates the administrative transparency requirements of Chapters 10 through 12.

The Ash'ariyya, associated above all with Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari (d. 935 CE) and later systematized by al-Ghazali (d. 1111 CE), took the contrary position with equal sophistication. On the Ash'ari account, God's will is the ultimate criterion of goodness and cannot be measured against any external standard without subordinating God to something above God — a metaphysical contradiction. To speak of God as "obligated" to

do anything, even by divine nature, is already to limit divine sovereignty in a manner incompatible with the absolute freedom required by strict Islamic monotheism. Justice, on this account, is whatever God determines. It is not that God could arbitrarily condemn the virtuous; it is that the concept of arbitrariness itself applies only within a framework of prior standards, and God is the source of all standards.

This is the most sophisticated form of exactly the position this essay contests: divine voluntarism, in which the ruler's will is constitutive of the moral order rather than answerable to it. The Ash'ari response to the Mu'tazilite challenge — that subordinating God to rational moral standards amounts to idolatry of reason — mirrors with striking exactness the "category objection" addressed in Chapter 3: the claim that political evaluative criteria constitute a category error when applied to divine ultimacy. The jurisdictional reply to both is the same. If the divine issues commands, attaches consequences, and demands allegiance in terms that trade on the moral vocabulary of justice, goodness, and mercy, those terms must retain enough evaluative content to generate genuine trust rather than mere submission. Mystery cannot be a one-way shield.

The doctrine of ʿadl — divine justice — in Twelver Shia theology deserves particular attention here. The Shia tradition maintained the Muʿtazilite commitment to rational divine justice as one of its five foundational principles (usul al-din). God’s justice, on this view, is not merely asserted as a matter of faith but is held to be publicly intelligible: God does not oppress, does not impose obligations without corresponding capacity, and does not punish beyond proportion to actual moral agency. The overlap with the proportionality standard developed in Chapter 14, and with the communicative clarity requirements of Chapter 10, is striking enough to merit acknowledgment as an independent theological tradition arriving at structurally convergent conclusions.

What is historically significant, though often overlooked in Western treatments of Islamic theology, is that the Mu'tazilite position was not merely speculative. Its influence under the Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mun produced the Mihna — a state-sponsored inquisition over the question of whether the Qur'an was created or uncreated — which represents one of the clearest historical cases of theological authority claims becoming engines of political coercion. The Mu'tazilites eventually lost politically, and Ash'ari theology became the dominant Sunni position. But the philosophical question they raised was never answered on its merits. It was marginalized by institutional power, not defeated by argument. Omittoism, approaching from a different direction, recovers that question and presses it beyond the horizon the medieval kalām tradition reached.

Hindu philosophical traditions offer a different and in some respects richer set of resources and challenges for the jurisdictional framework. The conceptually central term is dharma — of such semantic richness that it simultaneously designates right order, duty, cosmic law, ethical virtue, and the irreducible structure of moral reality. In several of the most important classical schools, dharma is not created by the gods. It is the frame within which even the gods operate. The gods are themselves subject to karma and moral consequence; they can act dharmically or adharmically, accrue merit or demerits, fall from their stations through transgression. In this significant respect, the inference from

divine creative power to moral authority — the central inference this essay disputes — is already blocked in major strands of Hindu thought.

The Mimamsa school of classical Indian philosophy pressed this point to its logical conclusion by arguing that the Vedic injunctions have inherent authority independent of any divine issuer. The Vedas, on the Mimamsa account, are apaurusheya — "not of human or divine authorship" — and their normative force derives from their own logical and semantic character rather than from any commanding personal deity behind them. The Mimamsakas therefore represent, from within a tradition deeply committed to Vedic authority, a philosophical demonstration that moral obligation does not require a divine legislator as its source. The standard stands independently of the issuer.

The resulting debate within classical Indian philosophy about whether ethical authority requires a personal divine commander — the Nyaya school arguing for Ishvara as a necessary cosmological posit, the Mimamsakas resisting theism as unnecessary for dharmic authority, the Advaita Vedanta of Shankara subsuming all apparent plurality including divine personality into non-dual Brahman — strikingly parallels the Western debate between divine command theory and natural law. And just as in the Western case, the philosophical resources for denying the inference from creation to jurisdiction were developed with sophistication from within the tradition itself.

The concept of karma introduces a further complexity directly relevant to the jurisdictional framework. Karma, in most of its classical formulations, is not a divine decree but an impersonal moral law: actions bear consequences determined by the structure of moral reality rather than by the verdict of a personal judge. This has a significant implication. Where consequences accrue through an impersonal mechanism rather than through personal divine judgment, the political metaphor of ruler-and-subjects begins to dissolve. What remains is less like governance in the legislative sense and more like what Chapter 19's discussion of constitutive versus juridical authority described: a framework in which moral order is built into the nature of things rather than issued from above. On that model, the jurisdictional critique's primary target shifts, but does not disappear. The question becomes whether any personal deity — Ishvara, Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva — acquires legitimate authority over persons through creation or sustenance, or whether the personal and the impersonal dimensions of the tradition are in tension with each other in exactly the way the juridical cleavage argument suggests.

Buddhist philosophy represents the most structurally consequential case for the Omittoist framework, precisely because it offers the experiment of a fully developed soteriological and ethical tradition that explicitly denies the existence of a creator God and, from that denial, draws no conclusion of moral nihilism or existential chaos. The Buddhist case is therefore the strongest available empirical demonstration of the constructive claim developed in Chapter 22: that ethics does not require divine legislation.

The Buddha's critique of creator-god belief in the Pali Canon is not primarily epistemological but analytical and practical. In texts including the Brahmajāla Sutta and

the Tevijja Sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya, the Buddha addresses the Brahmanical tradition's claims to authoritative knowledge of divine will and finds them incoherent on their own terms. The Tevijja Sutta's observation is particularly relevant: if the Brahmin teachers cannot agree on a description of Brahma — if sincere, educated seekers from within the same tradition arrive at incompatible accounts of what the divine requires — then the claim to guide others toward union with Brahma is empty guidance. This is an argument from administrative opacity articulated two and a half millennia before Omittoism formulated it in political vocabulary. A ruler whose commands are not accessibly and consistently promulgated cannot fairly hold subjects responsible for compliance or non-compliance. The Buddha drew a practical conclusion: the path to liberation cannot run through such contested authority.

Buddhist ethics — grounded in the analysis of suffering (dukkha), its causal conditions (samudāya), its cessation (nirodha), and the path to cessation (magga) — provides a working example of exactly the kind of non-sovereign moral framework sketched in Chapter 22. The prohibitions against harm, the cultivation of compassion (karuṇā) and loving-kindness (mettā), the emphasis on non-attachment to outcomes, and the cultivation of wisdom are not derived from divine command. They are presented as arising from a clear perception of the actual nature of sentient experience: that beings suffer, crave, depend on one another, and are capable of states that go better or worse from the inside. The structural overlap with the bio-social contract of Chapter 21 is not coincidental. Both ground moral obligation in the factual character of sentient interdependence rather than in the will of a commanding authority.

This does not mean Buddhist thought simply vindicates Omittoism without remainder. Several Buddhist traditions develop their own authority structures that the framework would need to scrutinize. Pure Land Buddhism posits a cosmic Buddha — Amitabha — whose grace can deliver beings to liberation, and the relation between practitioner and Buddha-field raises questions about voluntary orientation versus unchosen dependence that are not structurally remote from those raised about divine grace in Christian theology. The authority of the Sangha, the transmission of Dharma through teacher lineages, and the role of canonical texts all constitute authority claims whose legitimacy deserves the same audit applied to other traditions.

More fundamentally, the Buddhist analysis of the self (anattā — non-self) poses a deep challenge to the contractualist anthropology that underlies several of the framework's key moves. The birth problem, the consent problem, and the bio-social contract all presuppose a relatively robust conception of the person: a being whose moral standing grounds the legitimacy question, whose consent matters, whose vulnerability generates obligations in others. The Buddhist no-self analysis does not deny moral significance — it does not deny suffering, agency, or compassion — but it complicates the ontological furniture through which those concepts are typically articulated. Whether the jurisdictional framework's categories can be translated into a thoroughgoing anattā idiom without distortion is a question this essay cannot resolve and is honest enough not to pretend to answer.

What the Buddhist case contributes, at minimum, is the following: a tradition of extraordinary ethical seriousness and philosophical depth that explicitly declined the inference from cosmic origin to moral authority, and that built a complete account of human suffering, liberation, and obligation without requiring any divine commander as its foundation. That this tradition has produced, over twenty-five centuries, cultures of profound compassion, careful ethical reasoning, and dedicated care for the vulnerable is a standing refutation of the anxiety — raised in Chapter 22 — that ethics without divine legislation must collapse into nihilism or mere preference.

The engagement with Islamic kalām, Hindu philosophical theology, and Buddhist non-theism yields several contributions to the jurisdictional framework. First, it demonstrates that the question of whether divine authority can be evaluated by rational moral standards is not a peculiarly Western or post-Enlightenment importation. It was debated with extraordinary sophistication in ninth-century Baghdad, in classical Sanskrit philosophical literature, and in the Pali Canon's practical critique of Brahmanical authority claims. The authority question is a philosophical pressure that arises wherever comprehensive claims of cosmic governance are made over beings capable of asking whether those claims are justified.

Second, the global survey reveals that the inference from creation to moral jurisdiction — the central inference this essay contests — was never philosophically uncontested even within theistic traditions. The Mu'tazilite insistence on evaluable divine justice, the Mimamsa demonstration that dharmic authority requires no divine commander, and the Buddhist analysis of creator-god belief as a cognitive error all represent, from their own starting points, versions of the insight that power and right are not identical. These positions did not derive their conclusions from Western political philosophy. They arrived at structurally convergent results from entirely different premises, which is the best evidence available that the insight is not parochial.

Third, the non-Western traditions illuminate limits in the framework itself. The analysis conducted in this essay has been developed through the conceptual resources of Western political philosophy and applied primarily to the Western theological tradition. Its reach is genuine but not unlimited. The categories of consent, contract, and personal jurisdiction carry specific histories and embed specific anthropological assumptions — about the robustness of personal identity, the primacy of individual moral standing, the contractualist structure of obligation — that deserve scrutiny when imported into traditions built on different metaphysical foundations. A fully adequate account of the authority question in the global history of religion would require deeper engagement with Islamic political theology, Hindu metaphysics of dharma and cosmic order, Buddhist philosophy of mind and ethics, and traditions not addressed here.

What this chapter has attempted is more modest: to demonstrate that the audit is not the property of one civilization. It follows the authority claim wherever the authority claim goes. Wherever a cosmic governor is said to possess legitimate jurisdiction over rational beings by virtue of creative power, ontological superiority, or unchosen dependence, the question arises by what right that jurisdiction is exercised. The

philosophical traditions of humanity have not agreed on the answer. But they have, in their most rigorous moments, agreed that the question must be asked.

23. Shared Vulnerability and the Bio-Social Contract

The constructive heart of Omittoism lies in a simple observation: beings like us do not need to wait for supernatural command before moral norms become intelligible. We inhabit bodies that can be injured, minds that can be humiliated, and futures that can be secured or shattered by the conduct of others. We are not isolated wills floating above consequence. We are vulnerable organisms whose flourishing depends on patterns of reciprocity, trust, restraint, and care. Shared vulnerability is therefore not a sentimental afterthought. It is the ordinary condition from which moral seriousness begins.

The phrase bio-social contract names the framework built from this fact. It does not describe an actual historical agreement signed by all parties. It describes the rational structure that emerges once finite agents recognize two truths: first, that each values their own continued well-being, bodily integrity, and chance of flourishing; and second, that under conditions of interdependence these goods cannot be stably secured by unilateral predation. A creature who wants safety in a world of other vulnerable creatures has reason to support norms that make safety mutually possible.

This should not be caricatured as a crude reduction of ethics to self-interest. The point is not that every moral act is secretly selfish. The point is that the conditions under which any of us can live well are socially produced and socially fragile. Trust, care, truthfulness, and non-violence are not decorative virtues placed atop an already habitable world. They are part of what makes the world habitable. To damage them is eventually to damage the environment one must oneself inhabit.

The bio-social contract therefore combines reciprocity with asymmetry. Reciprocity matters because agents reasonably prefer a world in which help, restraint, and honesty are normalizable. But the framework is not trapped in narrow exchange logic. We do not protect infants, the ill, or the disabled because they can currently repay us in equal measure. We protect them because vulnerability itself, not market parity, is morally basic. The agent who acknowledges their own fragility cannot coherently deny the moral salience of fragility when it appears in others. To do so is to universalize a principle they could not endure if applied back to themselves.

This is where the idea of reflective endorsement becomes useful. The norms are not imposed from outside agency; they arise from what agency already commits itself to when it values its own persistence under conditions of dependence. If I desire a future in which I am not abandoned when weak, ignored when harmed, deceived when ignorant, or consumed when powerless, then I have reason to help sustain norms that make such treatment less likely for all. The future self I wish protected is linked to the present others whose protection sustains the very ecology in which my own safety becomes possible.

The contract is therefore diachronic as well as social. I help preserve a norm today not only because of who stands before me, but because of who I will become. Strength fluctuates. Health declines. luck rotates. The self who exploits others now may later depend upon the very institutions of care they helped corrode. Much cruelty is short-term opportunism masquerading as realism. The bio-social contract is a longer realism: it sees that a world structured by generalized disregard is ultimately uninhabitable even for the temporarily powerful.

A critic may still object that vulnerability describes a condition but does not yet generate a norm. That objection is important, because if post-sovereign ethics remains only descriptive, then the critique of divine jurisdiction would clear a space without furnishing a ground. The needed step is this: vulnerability matters morally because it is joined to inwardness. To injure a conscious being is not merely to rearrange matter but to violate a center of experience for whom the injury is lived from within. Once this is seen, reciprocity ceases to be sentiment and becomes structure. Each person knows, not by revelation but by embodiment, what it is to be exposed to pain, humiliation, fear, abandonment, deception, and domination. That shared condition does not mechanically yield a full moral code, but it does generate a public standard of justifiability: norms are legitimate insofar as they can be defended before beings whose interests in not being broken, used, or subordinated are fundamentally alike. This is why the post-theistic ethic need not pretend to metaphysical certainty in order to retain seriousness. Its force lies not in an external commander but in the publicly visible fact that finite persons flourish only where power is restrained by reciprocity, institutions remain corrigible, and no one's vulnerability is treated as raw material for another's project. Moral life then becomes not obedience to a superior will but fidelity to conditions under which vulnerable selves may coexist without domination.

A common objection comes from the rational egoist. Why not cooperate when weak and defect when strong? The answer is that such a strategy free-rides on a moral ecology it cannot itself universalize. It seeks the benefits of trust without bearing any of the costs of sustaining it. But a norm everyone may suspend whenever advantageous is not a norm. It is opportunism with temporary camouflage. The egoist imagines they can be sovereign over the social field while remaining protected by it. In practice, such a world dissolves into insecurity, arms races, concealed motives, and the erosion of precisely those background assurances upon which ordinary flourishing depends.

This framework also answers a deeper anxiety. Many people fear that without God morality becomes merely optional. Shared vulnerability shows why this is false. Some norms are not optional if one wishes to inhabit a world in which beings like oneself can live without constant catastrophe. One may still violate them; human beings obviously do. But violation no longer looks like brave emancipation from command. It looks like sabotage of the common conditions that make one's own life worth having.

There remains a question of aspiration. Does such an ethic explain only minimum decency, or can it support richer moral life? It can support more than survival because vulnerability is not only negative. It is also the basis of attachment, tenderness, trust,

friendship, and solidarity. We are moved by others not merely because they can wound us, but because our lives are thickened by care. A bio-social ethic can therefore underwrite generosity, hospitality, and forms of devotion that do not require submission to a master. It does not eliminate transcendence in the poetic sense. It relocates it into the seriousness of shared finite life.

The practical implication is large. If moral obligation can be grounded in the publicly visible structure of vulnerability and interdependence, then divine command is no longer needed as the primary source of ethical authority. Theology may still inspire some agents. But inspiration is different from foundation. The bio-social contract provides a common moral grammar for believers and unbelievers alike, because all alike inhabit bodies that can break, minds that can suffer, and futures that depend on how power is used among the vulnerable.

24. Ethics Without Divine Legislation

A frequent objection to critiques of divine authority is that they leave morality suspended in the air. If no divine command grounds obligation, then why be just? What gives moral claims objective force? Why should the strong restrain themselves, the selfish honor others, or the desperate refuse cruelty? This objection is serious because a critique of authority that dissolved all normativity would not liberate persons; it would abandon them. The question, then, is whether morality can retain seriousness without divine legislation.

The answer defended here is yes, though not by appeal to a simplistic secular certainty. Moral obligation need not be grounded in a commander to be real. One may begin from a fact too obvious to be profound and too profound to be dispensable: human beings are vulnerable, conscious creatures whose lives can go better or worse, whose suffering matters from the inside, and whose flourishing depends in part on forms of reciprocity, trust, restraint, and care that no one can fully secure alone. This shared vulnerability does not mechanically generate morality, but it furnishes its field.

Shared vulnerability, however, cannot remain only a mood, a sentiment, or a humane intuition. If it is to serve as the moral foundation of a post-sovereign ethic, it must be thick enough to generate structure. The point is not merely that human beings suffer, but that they suffer as beings who interpret, anticipate, remember, depend, and can be broken not only physically but symbolically, socially, and institutionally. From this condition a public moral architecture begins to emerge. The first principle is bodily and psychic inviolability: no moral order is legitimate if it treats persons as expendable material for a plan they did not author. The second is reciprocity: because each of us is vulnerable to injury, deception, humiliation, abandonment, and domination, norms become intelligible as mutual protections rather than decrees from above. The third is epistemic humility: no one, whether priest, ruler, tradition, ideology, or private conscience, may convert confidence into unquestionable title. Fallibility is not a marginal fact about the human condition; it is one of the reasons coercive

certainty is morally dangerous. The fourth is revisability: because finite communities misjudge, inherit error, and sanctify habit, moral systems must remain corrigible through criticism, testimony, dissent, and historical learning. The fifth is anti-domination: the aim of ethics is not only to classify acts as permitted or forbidden, but to prevent asymmetries of power from hardening into normalized subjection.

These principles do not descend from heaven, and that is precisely their strength. They arise from the publicly visible conditions of finite life. We know what makes them necessary not by secret revelation but by inhabiting a world where hunger, grief, coercion, fear, dependency, hope, and mutual exposure are common facts. Once this is seen, morality no longer appears as an alien legislation imposed on passive matter. It appears as the disciplined attempt of vulnerable beings to build a world in which vulnerability is not converted into prey-status. Truthfulness matters because deception colonizes the judgment of another. Mercy matters because finite beings crack under pressure. Fairness matters because institutions drift toward serving the already powerful unless counterweighted. Freedom matters because agency is part of dignity, not a decorative luxury. Care matters because no one becomes a self alone. Responsibility matters because vulnerability without reliability collapses into chaos. On this view, ethics is neither a divine command system nor a private aesthetic. It is a civic grammar of coexistence among beings whose fragility is shared even when their strengths are not. The bio-social contract, then, is not an imagined signature placed at the beginning of history. It is the standing moral logic that emerges whenever creatures capable of being harmed and of recognizing harm refuse to let force write the whole script. Its bindingness does not come from a cosmic sovereign but from the fact that each person stands as both possible victim and possible wielder of power. That symmetry is never perfect in practice, but it is enough to explain why moral life should be organized around protection, reciprocity, restraint, and repair rather than command, obedience, and sacred hierarchy.

The basic thought is conditional and practical rather than metaphysically extravagant. If persons regard their own suffering as a reason, if they seek their own continued existence and meaningful flourishing, and if they recognize that others are relevantly like themselves in these respects, then a space of reciprocal normativity opens. To want protections for oneself while denying in principle the standing of others to similar protections is not a logical contradiction in the strictest sense, but it is a form of practical incoherence. One asks from the social world what one refuses to recognize as claim-worthy in others.

A potential objection must be addressed directly. The move from "I value my own flourishing" to "I therefore have moral obligations toward others" is not automatic. The egoist might concede shared vulnerability as a fact while denying it generates any normative claim. The bridge is this: persons are not merely preference-satisfiers but *evaluators* — beings who make judgments about what matters, what is fair, and what constitutes a reason. Once a being operates in the space of evaluation at all, it implicitly appeals to standards that are not merely self-referential. To judge that *my* suffering matters is to invoke the concept of suffering-as-morally-significant. That concept, if it applies, applies in virtue of features I share with others — sentience, vulnerability, the capacity for life to go well or badly from the

inside. The refusal to extend it to others who instantiate those same features is not a coherent evaluative position; it is the abandonment of evaluation in favour of naked preference. This is not a proof that would move every nihilist, and no moral philosophy supplies such proofs. It shows that the egoist who genuinely reasons — rather than merely asserts — about what matters cannot coherently confine moral significance to themselves alone without thereby emptying the concept that was doing the justificatory work.

This line of thought has several advantages. It does not derive an "ought" from a bare "is" in a naive way. Rather, it begins from commitments agents already live by—care for their own lives, aversion to suffering, desire for recognition, dependence on social cooperation—and shows what follows if those commitments are to be sustained coherently in a world of others. It is not a proof that would move every nihilist. But moral philosophy rarely supplies such proofs. What it can do is expose the cost of positions, illuminate the structure of reasons, and show where self-understanding collapses into inconsistency or domination.

The account also preserves the distinction between morality and legislation. Moral truths, on this view, arise from the nature of beings capable of suffering, valuing, and reciprocity. Law may codify some of them; religion may express or deepen some of them; art may reveal dimensions of them; tradition may preserve practical wisdom about them. None of this requires that obligation be manufactured by command. Indeed, the intelligibility of command often presupposes a prior moral field. One can only ask whether a command is just if justice is not reducible to command.

This does not mean morality is easy. Secular ethical life offers no guaranteed cosmic compensation, no certain triumph of good, and no final assurance that justice will be completed. That absence is painful. Religious morality often answers precisely to this pain by promising ultimate vindication. The present framework does not mock that desire. It simply refuses to turn the desire for cosmic justice into evidence that divine jurisdiction is legitimate. We may need justice; that need does not settle the political question of who, if anyone, has the right to rule.

A non-theological ethic also has to confront tragedy honestly. Some injuries cannot be repaired, some loves cannot be restored, some injustices are never balanced. A morality that remains serious without eschatological guarantee must be willing to act under that uncertainty. It must treat decency not as a wager for reward but as the shape of integrity within finite life. This can seem austere, but it also removes a corrupting temptation: the temptation to excuse present injustice because a higher power will sort it out later. Human beings remain responsible for what they can do for one another now.

What about moral disagreement? The absence of divine legislation does not abolish disagreement, but neither does religion. History provides ample evidence that revelation does not end interpretive conflict. Secular ethics must therefore rely on public reason, argument, experience, institutional learning, and the slow correction of cruelty through criticism and struggle. This process is imperfect, but it possesses one decisive virtue: its standards are in

principle open to all rather than reserved for those who share a revelation. Public justification does not guarantee truth, but it disciplines power.

There is also room in this picture for reverence. To reject divine legislation is not to flatten existence into utility. Human beings may still experience awe before reality, gratitude before undeserved goods, humility before the scale of the cosmos, and reverence for persons whose inwardness exceeds our grasp. Art, love, mortality, courage, and truth can retain sacred intensity without requiring an unquestionable ruler behind them. Meaning need not be abolished because sovereignty is refused.

The relation between morality and religion can therefore be redescribed. Religion may serve as symbol, language, discipline, story, community, moral pedagogy, or encounter with transcendence. But when it claims political jurisdiction over conscience by virtue of divine command, it enters the terrain this essay audits. One may preserve the ethical, existential, and aesthetic goods of religious life while refusing the inference from sacred meaning to rightful rule. Indeed, some of those goods may be purified by the refusal.

A final caution is necessary. Ethics without divine legislation is not automatically humane. Secular regimes have committed atrocities. Human beings can be monstrous without religion and cruel in the name of reason. This fact does not rescue divine authority. It shows only that the problem of moral failure is deeper than metaphysical belief. A secular ethic must therefore be institutionally vigilant, psychologically realistic, and resistant to self-congratulation. It must know that no worldview grants innocence in advance.

Still, the central claim stands. Moral seriousness does not depend on unchosen rule. One can affirm obligations, condemn cruelty, prize truth, and honor the dignity of persons without grounding these in a divine legislator. The refusal of divine jurisdiction does not dissolve ethics. It relocates it in the shared condition of finite beings answerable to one another before they are answerable to any throne.

25. Political and Existential Implications

If the argument so far is sound, its consequences are not confined to abstract theology. They touch political life, moral education, bodily sovereignty, and the existential posture of persons in a pluralistic world. A theory of divine authority is never merely celestial. It shapes earthly institutions, legal claims, social hierarchies, and the moral imagination through which persons learn when to obey and when to resist.

The first implication concerns public reason. In a society marked by religious diversity and disagreement, laws that bind all citizens require justifications accessible in principle to all, not only to adherents of one revelation. This is not hostility to religion. It is respect for persons as co-governed agents. If divine command is not a settled public foundation of legitimacy, then policies concerning bodies, families, education, medicine, punishment, and civil rights cannot be justified solely by saying “God requires it.” Religious citizens remain

free to be motivated by faith. But law, to be legitimate in a plural polity, must speak in reasons sharable beyond sectarian authority.

The second implication concerns bodily sovereignty. If no authority acquires legitimate jurisdiction merely by claiming divine sanction, then the body is not a site where theology may automatically override agency. Questions of reproduction, end-of-life care, medical refusal, gendered hierarchy, and intimate life cannot be settled by appeal to unchosen metaphysical rule alone. This does not mean every choice is right. It means that political coercion requires reasons stronger than revelation-backed command. The body belongs within the sphere of justified law, not inherited sacred ownership.

The third implication concerns education. If legitimacy matters more than mere power, then moral education should cultivate the capacity to ask, "By what right?" Children should learn not only rules but the difference between guidance, expertise, care, domination, and rightful authority. This is not indoctrination into rebellion. It is preparation for adulthood in a world where institutions, states, traditions, and charismatic figures all seek deference. A citizenry unable to distinguish reverence from submission is easy to govern badly.

The fourth implication concerns resistance. The refusal of illegitimate divine authority provides a conceptual model for resisting unjust human authorities that cloak themselves in transcendence. Throughout history, states, patriarchs, empires, and sectarian movements have borrowed legitimacy from sacred narratives. If the divine itself is not beyond audit, then no earthly institution can claim borrowed sanctity as a substitute for justification. The critique of cosmic sovereignty thus feeds the critique of political absolutism below.

Existentially, the implications are subtler. To reject divine jurisdiction is not merely to remove an authority claim. It changes the emotional weather of existence. Some experience this as liberation: conscience is no longer occupied territory; fear loses its sacred mask; integrity ceases to mean submission. Others experience it as exposure: no final ruler guarantees justice; no cosmic parent secures meaning; one must build orientation without permission from above. Both reactions are understandable. The framework defended here does not deny the cost of exposure. It only claims that comfort is not a criterion of legitimacy.

There is also a transformation in the meaning of reverence. Under authoritarian theology, reverence is often fused with obedience. But reverence may also take the form of lucid attention: to truth without superstition, to persons without ownership, to suffering without rationalization, to beauty without domination, to mortality without denial. In that sense, the refusal of illegitimate rule may deepen reverence by freeing it from flattery and fear.

Another existential consequence is the rehabilitation of protest. If divine authority is not assumed legitimate, then lament, protest, and moral refusal are not necessarily impiety. They can become signs of seriousness. The cry against gratuitous suffering, the refusal to praise what appears unjust, the insistence that power answer to value—these may be expressions not of chaos but of moral adulthood. In many religious texts themselves, protest already

appears as a mode of faith. The present framework universalizes that insight by refusing to close the space of protest in advance.

At the same time, the framework imposes humility on its own adherents. To deny divine jurisdiction is not to enthrone the self as infallible. It is only to deny that authority escapes the demand for justification because it is immense. Human beings remain partial, vulnerable, often self-deceived. The refusal of an unquestioned ruler does not abolish the need for discipline, correction, dialogue, and tradition. It simply refuses to mistake those needs for proof that unchosen sovereignty is just.

The political and existential implications therefore converge on a single orientation: adulthood. Not adulthood as arrogance, but as the willingness to inherit no authority without asking what would justify it; to act morally without guaranteed applause from the cosmos; to seek meaning without surrendering judgment; and to remain open to transcendence without placing conscience under conquest. If a god exists and is good, such adulthood should not offend that god. If it does offend, the offense may reveal more about the ruler than the subject.

26. Public Reason, Law, and the Secular State

If the critique of divine authority were merely speculative, its importance would be limited. But claims about God's right to rule rarely remain in the heavens. They descend into institutions, law, education, medicine, sexuality, family structure, punishment, and the organization of public life. The political implications of jurisdictional sovereignty therefore matter not only for philosophy of religion but for democratic coexistence. Once one denies that divine command automatically generates legitimate authority, the standards by which public power is justified must shift correspondingly.

The central implication is a strengthened public reason requirement. In a plural society, citizens disagree deeply about revelation, metaphysics, salvation, sacred history, and the moral interpretation of scripture. Under such conditions coercive law cannot be justified merely by appeal to one group's account of divine will. This is not because religious citizens must silence their convictions, still less because religion is morally trivial. It is because those subject to law are owed reasons they can in principle assess without first converting to a particular theology. When the state says "you must," it speaks in a register of jurisdiction, and jurisdiction among free and equal citizens demands justifications available in common.

This requirement becomes especially urgent in domains of bodily sovereignty. Reproductive decisions, end-of-life decisions, refusal or acceptance of medical treatment, and questions of gendered self-determination all involve intimate control over embodied life. Religious frameworks often speak passionately here because they understand the body within a sacred order. But intensity of conviction does not erase the duty of public justification. If one seeks to limit another citizen's choices by law, one must show why the

limitation is warranted in terms accessible to that citizen as citizen, not merely as a potential co-believer. To say "God forbids this" may explain one's motivation. It does not suffice as a public reason.

The same principle bears on education. A democratic education worthy of the name should not merely socialize compliance. It should equip persons to distinguish authority from legitimacy, inheritance from justification, and sincerity from warrant. This includes religious authority. Students should learn how traditions reason, how texts are interpreted, how moral claims are defended, how power operates within institutions, and how dissent can be principled rather than nihilistic. Such education is not indoctrination against religion. It is protection against the monopolization of conscience by any authority—religious, political, or cultural—that claims exemption from scrutiny.

There is also an institutional lesson about exemptions. Liberal democracies often grant accommodations to religious practice, and many such accommodations are humane. But exemptions become problematic when they shift burdens onto third parties or allow institutions to treat others according to sectarian authority without those others' consent. A hospital serving the public, an employer exercising substantial power over workers, or a school shaping young persons cannot assume that its internal theology automatically licenses public coercion. The more an institution functions within a shared civic order, the less plausible it becomes to treat divine command as self-validating.

Jurisdictional sovereignty also clarifies a persistent confusion in secular politics. Some critics of religion oppose theocratic reasoning by embracing a kind of flattened relativism or aggressive contempt. That is a mistake. The problem with theocratic politics is not that religious people are irrational by definition or that their moral intuitions are worthless. The problem is structural: no citizen may rightly place another under coercive authority solely by citing a revelation, metaphysics, or divine mandate the other has not consented to recognize. This is an argument from political equality, not from disdain.

In this respect the framework can speak constructively to believers as well. A religious citizen may remain fully devout while acknowledging that divine authority, even if real, does not exempt public law from reciprocity. Indeed, some of the noblest religious contributions to democratic life have arisen precisely when believers distinguished prophetic moral witness from juridical imposition. They argued vigorously from their convictions while accepting that coercive law must be answerable to those who do not share them. Such citizens do not privatize faith. They discipline power.

There are, however, harder cases. What of a believer who sincerely thinks that failing to legislate according to God's command permits grave injustice? Here the framework does not pretend easy harmony. Democratic life often requires citizens to inhabit painful tension between ultimate commitments and civic reciprocity. Yet that tension is not a defect of democracy. It is a consequence of living among persons who possess their own consciences and cannot be treated as extensions of one's revelation. To coerce them on grounds they cannot even in principle share is to treat them politically as children of another household.

A further implication concerns the symbolism of the state. When governments fuse national identity with divine chosenness, sacred history, or theological destiny, they increase the danger that dissent will be treated not merely as political disagreement but as spiritual betrayal. This is one of the oldest and most combustible forms of authority inflation. Jurisdictional sovereignty counsels resistance here not because public life must be spiritually empty, but because the state becomes especially dangerous when it borrows transcendence. A nation convinced that heaven underwrites its jurisdiction will find fewer reasons to justify itself to those it governs.

The framework also illuminates why secular institutions themselves must be audited. To refuse divine right is not to sanctify the modern state. States can become quasi-theological in their demand for loyalty, sacrifice, and moral deference. Bureaucracies can hide behind expertise as churches hide behind mystery. Nations can transfigure violence into liturgy. The jurisdictional question therefore travels. The lesson learned against cosmic sovereignty applies downward as well: power is not self-justifying; reverence for institutions is never a substitute for accountability; and the most expansive claims demand the strictest scrutiny.

At its best, then, a secular political order is not a metaphysical denial of transcendence. It is a regime of humility about jurisdiction. It says that because citizens disagree about ultimate reality, no one may commandeer the common world on the basis of an authority relation the others have not reason to recognize. It creates space in which devotion may flourish, disbelief may flourish, and moral argument may continue without one comprehensive doctrine translating itself directly into law.

This is not neutrality in the shallow sense. It is a substantive commitment to the moral standing of persons as co-authors of the political conditions under which they live. It does not settle every policy dispute. But it sets the bar correctly. In public life, as in theology, the question is not merely who is powerful or convinced. The question is who has the right to rule.

27. Human Psychology and the Desire to Kneel

A theory of divine authority cannot remain solely at the level of formal argument, because human beings do not encounter authority as abstract wills. They encounter it through fear, longing, memory, dependence, imitation, gratitude, hope, and the desire for orientation. The appeal of cosmic sovereignty is not merely intellectual. It is psychological and existential. One reason the authority question is so rarely asked is that many of the motives that make people religious also make authority emotionally intelligible before it is philosophically justified.

The desire for a righteous ruler is among the oldest of human wishes. Life is unstable. History is violent. The moral field is fogged by partiality, self-deception, and contingency. Under such conditions the idea that above the visible disorder stands a perfectly just

intelligence can feel less like domination than rescue. To submit is then experienced not as humiliation but as relief: relief from self-sovereignty, from ambiguity, from the loneliness of judgment, from the apparent randomness of suffering, from the anxiety that nothing and no one finally sees. Religion at its best can answer not only questions of truth but needs for recognition, forgiveness, communion, and ultimate significance.

These needs should not be mocked. They belong to the human condition. But their depth is precisely why they must not be confused with proof. The fact that people long for a just authority does not establish that any authority claiming to satisfy the longing is legitimate. In politics this lesson is familiar. Populations exhausted by chaos often welcome strong rulers who promise order, meaning, and protection. The more frightened a community is, the more attractive certainty becomes. Yet the attractiveness of certainty often exceeds its moral worth. The hunger for paternal order can become one of the pathways through which domination normalizes itself.

Something similar can occur in religion. The image of God as father, king, judge, shepherd, or lord can answer real psychic needs, particularly where human vulnerability is vivid. But those same images may encourage forms of submission that are difficult to distinguish from sanctified dependency. The believer learns to reinterpret doubt as pride, dissent as rebellion, suffering as lesson, hiddenness as test, and obedience as love. Sometimes these reinterpretations deepen character. Sometimes they protect a structure from criticism by morally pathologizing resistance. A psychology of trust can quietly become a pedagogy of self-silencing.

There is also the moral attraction of surrender. To place one's life under a supreme will can seem noble because it appears to decenter ego. In many religious lives this decentering is genuinely fruitful. It loosens vanity, softens possessiveness, and opens persons to compassion. But self-transcendence does not require authoritarian metaphysics. One can be humbled by reality, by love, by beauty, by mortality, by truth, or by the needs of others without granting unconditional jurisdiction to a ruler. The psychological goodness of humility should not be allowed to smuggle in a political conclusion. Humility can coexist with refusal. One may say, "I am not supreme," without also saying, "therefore another has proven the right to command me."

The role of childhood is especially important. Religious authority is often first encountered before reflective independence. The child does not hear "God commands" as a proposition among many. The child hears it within an atmosphere constituted by trusted adults, ritual repetition, emotional intensity, and often the fear of disapproval or abandonment. This means the earliest layers of divine authority can become entwined with attachment itself. Later critique then feels not merely intellectual but filial, disloyal, or spiritually dangerous. The authority claim is protected not only by doctrine but by the architecture of belonging.

This does not imply bad faith on the part of religious communities. Most transmit what they take to be true and good. But sincerity does not neutralize structure. A person raised to regard dissent as a moral defect may internalize submission long before they learn how

legitimacy is ordinarily evaluated. Their eventual obedience may therefore express both conviction and conditioning. The two are difficult to disentangle. This difficulty is one reason public scrutiny matters. Private sincerity alone cannot resolve whether a system has earned the allegiance it receives.

Human beings also possess a striking tendency to reinterpret asymmetry as worth. What is highest, oldest, strongest, or most encompassing easily acquires an aura of moral superiority. The mountain, the monarch, the parent, the tradition, the cosmos: scale exerts rhetorical force. The mind is drawn to grandeur. But political modernity was, among other things, a rebellion against the equation of superiority with right. Kings were still powerful after they ceased to be sacral. Fathers remained significant after paternal absolutism was challenged. Institutions remained venerable after their claims were audited. The same clarification is needed at the theological level. Grandeur may evoke awe. It does not settle jurisdiction.

One might object that this psychological analysis risks reducing religion to projection or neurosis. That would be a mistake. The aim is not reduction but complication. Religious experience may disclose something real. It may orient persons toward truth, goodness, or reality in ways secular analysis underestimates. But even if that is so, the authority relation requires separate evaluation. The fact that submission answers a deep psychological need may explain why the relation is attractive. It does not show why the relation is legitimate.

Indeed, there are forms of moral maturity that require resisting the seduction of total authority. To become an adult is not merely to accumulate capacities. It is also to learn how to live without guarantees, how to judge without omniscience, how to act under uncertainty, how to endure the absence of final witnesses, and how to remain ethical without perfect supervision. Some persons find that religion deepens these capacities. Others find that certain religious structures inhibit them by externalizing conscience into command. The difference matters. A framework that treats adult moral agency as permanently heteronomous may preserve obedience at the cost of responsibility's deepest form.

The desire to kneel is therefore morally ambiguous. Sometimes one kneels from gratitude, reverence, and love. Sometimes from fear. Sometimes from exhaustion. Sometimes because one has been taught that standing upright before power is itself a vice. The gesture cannot be interpreted in isolation from the order that elicited it. If the kneeling takes place under opacity, inherited conditioning, infinite stakes, and non-consensual entry into the relationship, then it cannot simply be read as a moral endorsement of the sovereign.

The point of jurisdictional sovereignty is not to forbid reverence. It is to protect the space in which reverence can remain honest. An honest reverence would be one that can survive scrutiny, one that does not need the pathologization of doubt, one that does not make fear the secret engine of praise, one that does not equate maturity with permanent submission. Such reverence may still exist. But if it does, it will not be secured by bypassing the authority question. It will be secured only by facing it.

In this sense the psychological dimension deepens rather than weakens the critique. It shows why authority claims feel natural, why persons may embrace them lovingly, and why resistance can seem existentially costly. Yet precisely because these motives run so deep, objective standards become more necessary. Where longing is powerful, the temptation to confuse need with warrant grows. The corrective is not cynicism. It is discipline: the discipline of asking whether what consoles also governs, and if it governs, whether it has earned the right.

28. Philosophical Orphanhood and Post-Theistic Maturity

Every age has an image of adulthood. Some define it by independence, some by responsibility, some by inheritance skillfully borne. Omittoism proposes a distinctive image: the philosophical orphan. The phrase sounds harsher than it is meant to be. It does not celebrate emotional severance for its own sake, nor does it ask human beings to become culturally rootless. It names the condition of a person who has ceased to treat cosmic parenthood as the automatically justified frame of moral life — remaining open to such a relation if it could be shown legitimate, but no longer assuming it without argument.

Much theology imagines humanity under permanent childhood. God is father, lawgiver, protector, educator, and final judge. There are humane forms of this picture, but it often carries a hidden risk: maturity becomes structurally impossible. The believer may grow in obedience, deepen in piety, and refine their conscience, yet they remain asymmetrically dependent in a way that forever limits jurisdiction over their own inner life. The highest virtue becomes filial deference rather than responsible equality among persons.

The philosophical orphan rejects this without rejecting gratitude, reverence, or humility. It says that if one is capable of judgment, one is capable of assessing even the authority that claims to have formed one. To become an orphan in this sense is not to deny one's origins. It is to deny that origin settles final allegiance. The psychologically difficult step is separating indebtedness from subordination. Many people can imagine disagreeing with a government more easily than disagreeing with a cosmic parent, because parenthood reaches deeper layers of fear and need. The orphan image names the courage required to pass through that fear.

There is loss in this passage. A person may surrender the sense of being watched over, carried by providence, or guaranteed an ultimate explanation. They may lose a vocabulary that once made suffering feel placed rather than raw. They may even grieve the intimate drama of prayer addressed to a supervising source of meaning. Omittoism should not mock this grief. Intellectual honesty can be costly because pictures of the world are also habitats of the heart.

Yet there are gains as well. One is the end of metaphysical infantilization. The orphan no longer asks what a celestial parent wants in every moral dilemma. They ask what justice, care, courage, and truth require among the vulnerable. Another gain is the purification of

reverence. Where no sovereign title is presumed, whatever remains worthy of awe can be approached without servility. Beauty, existence, consciousness, and the strange fact of reality itself can be honored without being folded into a command structure.

Post-theistic maturity also changes the meaning of dependence. We do not become self-sufficient. We become more honestly dependent on the right things: one another, institutions of care, ecological conditions, inherited knowledge, and practices that sustain reflection. In leaving behind the fantasy of cosmic custody, we may become more attentive to the concrete dependencies we actually inhabit and too often neglect.

The orphan image matters politically as well. Citizens raised on sacral hierarchy often reproduce its habits in worldly institutions. They seek strong fathers, purity myths, unquestionable leaders, and redemptive punishment. A culture of philosophical orphanhood would be less susceptible to these transfers because it would no longer mistake protection for legitimacy. It would know that care can be real without becoming title, and that authority is healthiest when it aims at its own eventual reducibility.

This maturity is not the same as rebellion. Rebellion can still define itself against the parent it cannot leave. Orphanhood, by contrast, marks a quieter transition. The center of moral gravity shifts. One no longer lives as a cosmic minor waiting for approval. One lives as a finite adult among other finite adults, still capable of error and wonder, but no longer willing to confuse vertical dependence with final normativity.

In this sense, philosophical orphanhood is not the destruction of the sacred. It is the refusal to let the sacred monopolize authority through parental imagery. It opens the possibility that the most dignified human posture before reality is neither childish dependence nor arrogant self-deification, but adult composure: able to inherit, able to mourn, able to stand, and able to say that love—if it is truly love—does not require the permanent legal minority of the beloved.

29. Responsibility, Character, and Moral Development Without Tutelage

One persistent anxiety shadows every attempt to separate ethics from divine rule: if no perfect authority stands over us, what becomes of character? Does responsibility shrink into preference? Does conscience weaken into taste? Does moral life lose both discipline and aspiration? These worries deserve more than dismissal because they identify a genuine danger. Human beings are accomplished rationalizers. They often seek liberation not in order to become more responsible, but in order to become less accountable. Any philosophy that rejects tutelage must therefore explain what mature responsibility looks like when no unchosen sovereign guarantees it from above.

The first answer is that responsibility can deepen when it is no longer outsourced. Under strongly heteronomous systems, moral seriousness is often tied to compliance: the central

question becomes whether one has aligned oneself with command. This can produce admirable steadiness, but it can also create moral passivity. People learn to ask what is permitted rather than what is fitting, what is required rather than what is humane, what secures acquittal rather than what repairs a world shared with others. By contrast, an ethic rooted in shared vulnerability and reciprocal conditions of flourishing asks the agent to deliberate more fully. It offers fewer totalizing shortcuts and demands more developed judgment.

This does not make morality easier. It makes it adult. Moral adulthood is the condition in which one cannot simply hand final responsibility to an invisible superior. One must interpret situations, weigh harms, imagine the standpoint of others, revise in light of error, and accept that excuses thin out when one has the capacity to know better. The absence of cosmic tutelage therefore raises the bar for intellectual honesty. One cannot hide behind ritual correctness when one has ignored another's pain.

Character, on this view, is not obedience internalized but responsiveness disciplined. The courageous person is not merely one who follows command despite fear, but one who remains available to reality rather than retreating into self-protective illusion. The just person is not merely law-abiding, but habitually attentive to asymmetry, power, and the conditions under which others are exposed. The truthful person is not merely doctrinally correct, but willing to name uncertainty without fleeing responsibility. Virtue becomes less a matter of pleasing authority and more a matter of becoming someone fit for co-worlding with other vulnerable beings.

This approach also clarifies repentance. In many theistic settings repentance is structurally vertical: one has primarily offended God, and injury to others is interpreted through that relation. Omittoism does not forbid inward remorse, but it reorients repair horizontally. The decisive question becomes: what damage have I done to the world we share, to bodies, trust, institutions, memory, or the future conditions of reciprocity? This can be more demanding than private contrition because it requires material acknowledgment, not merely spiritual relief.

A further benefit follows. When morality is not grounded in the will of a superior, the temptation to sanctify cruelty weakens. History repeatedly shows how easily commanded ethics can be mobilized against conscience, especially when suffering can be redescribed as deserved, pedagogical, or redemptive. A non-tutelary ethic is not immune to brutality, but it removes one powerful alibi: the thought that harm is righteous because it issues from unquestionable height. In this sense, post-sovereign ethics can cultivate a more vigilant conscience.

Still, moral development needs practices. No serious philosophy of responsibility can rely on abstraction alone. People require habits of attention, memory, self-critique, and communal reinforcement. Here the constructive side of Omittoism becomes important. Reflection at the end of the day, not as confession to a celestial supervisor but as audit of one's response to the vulnerable; institutions that reward repair rather than symbolic purity; rituals of mourning that train the imagination to treat each life as irreplaceable; public norms

of argument that distinguish disagreement from dehumanization; educational forms that teach children not merely to obey but to justify and revise—these are not decorative supplements. They are the ecology of mature character.

Responsibility without tutelage also changes the meaning of freedom. Freedom is not the thrill of having no master and therefore no standard. It is the burden of becoming answerable without metaphysical guardianship. Such freedom can feel severe. It removes some consolations. Yet it also protects something precious: the possibility that goodness is not the echo of domination but the disciplined practice of living well with others whose vulnerability mirrors one's own.

The question, then, is not whether moral life can survive without divine rule. It plainly can. The deeper question is whether moral life may in some respects become clearer when it is no longer filtered through the need to reconcile every norm with unquestioned sovereignty. A person who helps the stranger because suffering matters, not because they are being watched; who tells the truth because reality deserves care, not because lying breaks a decree; who refuses humiliation because dignity is real, not because permission has been granted—such a person is not morally thinner. They may be standing closer to the source of responsibility than they were under tutelage.

30. Identity, Culture, Ritual, and the Problem of Belonging

No philosophy survives long if it speaks only to the intellect and neglects the social body. Human beings do not live inside arguments alone. They inherit songs, funerals, feasts, weddings, calendars, gestures, narratives of origin, vocabularies of grief, and shared images of the good. Religion has endured not merely because it offers doctrines, but because it houses belonging. Any serious post-theological framework must therefore face a difficult question: what becomes of identity and communal form once authority is no longer grounded in sacred command?

The easiest answer would be to discard ritual as residue and treat culture as private preference. That answer is too thin. Ritual is not valuable only when metaphysically guaranteed. Its importance often lies in what it does for finite beings: it marks transition, creates shared attention, stabilizes memory, distributes grief, welcomes the newborn, honors the dead, and converts abstraction into lived form. To reject unchosen sovereignty is not to reject the human need for form. It is to ask whether form can be preserved without domination.

This is where the Omittoist idea of post-theistic liturgy becomes useful. The claim is not that one can seamlessly replace religion with a sterile ceremony of reason. Rather, it is that communities can consciously retain and reinvent practices whose meaning arises from human seriousness rather than supernatural command. A funeral can be sacred in the sense that the word originally sought to protect: it can set apart a life as worthy of concentrated

attention. A marriage can be solemn because promises between vulnerable beings matter, not because a cosmic ruler has countersigned them. A birth can be welcomed as the arrival of a new center of experience, not as the insertion of another subject into a pre-written chain of metaphysical debt.

Belonging, however, is not only ritual. It is also narrative identity. People want to know who they are in relation to ancestors, language, land, and shared memory. Traditional religions often supply this by binding truth, morality, and community into a single package. Omittoism must resist both romantic severance and authoritarian fusion. It need not tell people to despise inherited worlds. But it must also refuse the demand that belonging be purchased with uncritical assent. One may honor the poetic, ethical, and civilizational wealth of a tradition while auditing its authority claims. Fidelity and criticism need not be enemies.

This matters especially in families and plural societies. The child who no longer believes, the convert who leaves, the skeptic who still loves the songs of childhood, the secular citizen who lives among believers, the believer who shares a home with dissenters—all inhabit the politics of belonging. A mature philosophy cannot treat these cases as secondary. It must explain how disagreement about the sacred can coexist with dignity, tenderness, and civic peace. Omittoism's answer is procedural before it is metaphysical: no identity deserves preservation by coercing conscience. Traditions may persuade, attract, invite, and teach. They may not claim a natural right to own the inner verdicts of those born within them.

There is also a danger on the other side. Communities built around critique can become culturally barren if they mistake permanent negation for form. Human beings do not flourish by audit alone. They require beauty, shared practices, seasonal rhythms, and symbols that gather experience without falsifying it. Here art, philosophy, and civic ritual can collaborate. Public commemorations of loss, vows of care, reading circles, rites of adulthood based on responsibility rather than dogma, moments of silence that do not presume doctrinal unity, meditative practices directed toward perspective rather than submission—these are examples of cultural form without unchosen sovereignty.

The phrase philosophical orphan names a useful ideal. It does not mean culturally rootless. It means one who no longer mistakes dependence for legitimacy and can inherit without kneeling. The philosophical orphan is mature enough to receive language, art, and memory gratefully while refusing the proposition that inheritance settles authority. This posture is psychologically difficult because belonging often tempts us to silence the very questions that adulthood requires. Yet the alternative is worse: a counterfeit peace bought by interior abdication.

A society capable of this balance would not be post-religious in the shallow sense of being merely disenchanted. It would be post-sovereign in a deeper sense. It would know how to carry reverence without command, memory without ownership, mourning without metaphysical blackmail, and celebration without compulsory creed. Such a society may still contain believers and unbelievers alike. What it cannot contain, if it is to remain just, is the assumption that culture grants title over conscience.

31. Ethics, Meaning, and Life Without Unchosen Sovereignty

One anxiety often follows any critique of divine authority: if obedience is no longer the basis of morality, what remains? Does the refusal of unchosen sovereignty leave only subjectivism, fragmentation, and existential drift? This anxiety is understandable because many religious systems have for centuries linked normativity, meaning, and transcendence so tightly that to loosen one strand seems to endanger all three. Yet the inference is too quick. The argument against illegitimate authority does not entail that nothing is true, nothing is good, or nothing matters. It entails only that truth, goodness, and meaning cannot be reduced to the command of a superior will.

Moral life can be approached from another starting point: not command but shared vulnerability.[7] Human beings are embodied, finite, and susceptible to injury. They flourish only under conditions of trust, reciprocity, and forms of cooperation no isolated individual can produce alone. They can suffer humiliation, abandonment, coercion, and preventable pain. They also possess reflective capacities through which they recognize these facts not only in themselves but in others. Out of this structure emerges a moral field. To know what one's own pain means is already to be in the vicinity of knowing what another's pain means. To depend on recognition is already to stand under a reason not to annihilate the recognitional standing of others. None of this yields a complete ethic automatically, but it generates a powerful basis for moral seriousness without appeal to cosmic command.

The point may be put in contractualist terms. If reasons are to justify action among persons, they must be reasons others could not reasonably reject as terms of common life. Cruelty, domination, betrayal, and arbitrary violence fail not because a ruler has forbidden them, though perhaps one has, but because they cannot be vindicated to those made to bear them. Or the point may be put in Kantian terms. Persons are not mere instruments for another's projects because they are centers of valuation whose agency has irreducible moral significance. Or in Aristotelian terms: human beings have forms of flourishing that are damaged by vice, injustice, and the corruption of practical reason. These traditions differ, but together they show that moral objectivity need not take the form of obedience to a sovereign.

Meaning too need not collapse. There is a difference between being supervised and living meaningfully. Meaning often arises from relation, creation, fidelity, understanding, love, and participation in goods that outlast immediate appetite. The life of a scientist devoted to truth, of a physician devoted to care, of an artist devoted to form, of a friend devoted to loyalty, of a parent devoted to a child, or of a citizen devoted to justice is not rendered empty because it

[7] The metaethical foundation implied here is closest to T.M. Scanlon's contractualism in *What We Owe to Each Other* (Harvard, 1998): an act is wrong if it violates principles that no one could reasonably reject as a basis for mutual governance. Scanlon explicitly argues that this framework requires no divine backing. The present account differs in grounding reasonable rejection in shared vulnerability rather than in the formal structure of reasons, but the anti-theological implication is the same.

is not carried out under explicit divine command. Indeed, such lives often display meaning precisely because the commitments are owned rather than merely inherited. Their seriousness comes from what is recognized, cultivated, and sustained in freedom.

This matters because one of the attractions of authoritarian metaphysics is that it appears to guarantee significance from above. If there is a cosmic ruler with a plan, then every life seems already assigned a place within an intelligible totality. Yet imposed significance is not obviously the highest kind. A meaning one is forbidden to examine may become another name for placement. A life can have narrative coherence without being heteronomous. Persons do not become weightless when they cease to be subjects. They become more responsible for the forms of value they endorse and enact.

There is also a spiritual dimension here that need not be surrendered. Wonder at existence, gratitude for beauty, reverence before truth, the experience of moral demand, grief before mortality, and the sense that reality exceeds possession are all compatible with the refusal of illegitimate rule. One may stand before the night sky, the face of a loved one, a line of music, or the unearned fact of consciousness and feel something close to the religious without concluding that one is under justified command. Reverence is broader than obedience. It includes astonishment, humility, and responsiveness to what is great without requiring political submission to it.

A framework without unchosen sovereignty also changes the texture of responsibility. Under command-based systems the fundamental moral question often becomes, “What am I permitted or forbidden to do by the highest authority?” Under a non-authoritarian ethic the question shifts toward, “What do I owe other beings given what they are and what I am?” The difference is substantial. The former can encourage dependency on decree. The latter demands judgment, dialogue, and revision. It is more difficult because there is no perfect external warranty. But difficulty is not a defect if it is the cost of taking persons seriously as co-deliberators rather than subordinates.

Of course such an ethic is vulnerable. Human beings are biased, self-interested, and often cruel. The absence of unquestionable authority can expose moral life to conflict and uncertainty. Yet authoritarian systems have not escaped these vulnerabilities; they have merely relocated them into institutions that claim sacred backing while remaining thoroughly human in interpretation and enforcement. The question is not whether fallibility can be abolished. It is whether fallible beings should hand moral jurisdiction over to structures that magnify power while diminishing accountability. Jurisdictional sovereignty answers no. Better an ethics that admits its need for argument than one that hides argument behind command.

This position also has implications for forgiveness, repentance, and hope. If morality is not centrally a debt owed to a sovereign, then wrongdoing is understood less as cosmic insubordination and more as injury, betrayal, distortion, or failure of relation. Repentance becomes the labor of truthfully confronting what one has damaged. Forgiveness becomes a morally complex practice of restoration where possible, not a mere legal cancellation issued from above. Hope becomes less a wager on acquittal by authority and more a commitment to

repair, solidarity, and the unfinished possibility of becoming less harmful than one has been. Many religious traditions know these insights as well. The point is that they do not depend conceptually on sovereignty.

The treatment of mortality also changes. Under many theologies death is inseparable from judgment, reward, punishment, and the final ratification of authority. Without those structures mortality may appear harsher, but it can also become more honest. The finite life is not a probationary corridor whose central significance lies elsewhere. It is the scene in which care, courage, justice, cruelty, tenderness, and truthfulness actually occur. This can intensify rather than diminish seriousness. If there is no guaranteed cosmic rectification visible to us, then the urgency of human responsibility increases. The hungry still need food, the lonely still need company, the oppressed still need defense, and the dead do not become less dead because one imagines an ultimate tribunal.

There remains the question of universality. Can an ethic grounded in vulnerability, reciprocity, and the dignity of persons claim broad validity without collapsing into cultural preference? Here one should resist false choices. Not every universal claim must be metaphysically absolute in the same way. Some universals arise from recurrent conditions of life. Beings who can suffer, depend on recognition, reason about action, and coexist under conditions of mutual exposure will face broadly similar normative pressures whether they articulate them in secular, religious, or hybrid vocabularies. The details of moral life vary, but the prohibition against gratuitous domination, the importance of trust, and the significance of fairness are not arbitrary inventions of one culture. They are responses to structural facts about what kinds of beings we are.

In this light, the refusal of illegitimate divine sovereignty is not nihilism. It is a wager that morality becomes clearer when severed from unchosen command. It is also a wager that meaning deepens when persons are treated not as subjects awaiting orders but as participants in the shared construction of a livable world. The wager may be wrong. But it is not empty. It has behind it the whole history of human attempts to restrain power, dignify conscience, and convert fear-driven obedience into reflective responsibility.

A final clarification is needed. To live without unchosen sovereignty is not to enthrone the self as absolute. The self is no less finite for rejecting domination. It remains answerable to truth, to others, to consequences, to mortality, and to the stubborn reality that not every desire deserves endorsement. The difference is that these forms of answerability are not imagined as the decrees of an unquestioned ruler. They are features of a world in which beings like us can wrong one another and can also, with difficulty, learn to live otherwise.

That may not satisfy those who want the universe itself to guarantee justice. But perhaps philosophical maturity consists partly in refusing guarantees purchased through authoritarian premises. The absence of a justified cosmic sovereign does not empty life of value. It places value where it can actually be practiced: in how we reason, how we refuse cruelty, how we care for the vulnerable, how we tell the truth, how we use power, and how we endure the unfinishedness of the human condition without sanctifying whoever claims to stand above it.

32. Metaphysical Stoicism and the Grace of the Void

Once the universe is no longer imagined as a supervised moral courtroom, a practical question immediately follows: how should one live under conditions of opacity, finitude, and possible indifference? It is not enough to win an argument against illegitimate authority if the emotional result is paralysis. Omittoism therefore needs not only critique but posture. One such posture may be called metaphysical stoicism.

This does not mean emotional numbness. It means learning to distinguish what lies within one's practical jurisdiction from what does not. The beginnings of this insight are ancient. Human beings waste enormous psychic energy raging at the basic structure of reality—mortality, contingency, the fact that pain exists, the fact that the past cannot be revised, the fact that no cosmic guarantee stands behind every loss. Rage may be understandable, but it often becomes sterile when directed at what no action can alter. Metaphysical stoicism proposes a reallocation of seriousness rather than a denial of feeling.

The first movement is distinction. I do not control the ultimate architecture of the cosmos, but I do participate in the architecture of my conduct. I do not govern death, but I can govern whether I meet death with cowardice or care. I do not command history, but I can help determine whether the small world around me becomes more trustworthy or more cruel. Such distinctions are not consolation prizes. They are where agency actually lives.

The second movement is meaning-construction without bad faith. In highly supervised cosmologies, meaning is often received as assignment. One's life matters because it fits a larger plan. Under post-sovereign conditions, meaning becomes a work rather than a decree. That can feel frightening because it places responsibility back into human hands. Yet it also makes meaning more honest. A value one helps build through fidelity, craft, friendship, or service is genuinely one's own in a way that borrowed cosmic scripts sometimes are not.

The third movement is perspective. The void, in this context, does not mean literal nothingness. It names the absence of guaranteed paternal closure. To experience this absence can initially feel like abandonment. Over time it can become grace of a severe kind. If the universe is not constantly converting one's life into reportable obedience, then one is released from a certain style of theatrical self-consciousness. One can do good because good is needed, not because one is being metaphysically scored. One can love without imagining every tenderness archived in a celestial ledger. One can mourn without forcing loss into a pre-approved narrative before it has been fully felt.

Metaphysical stoicism therefore resists two opposite temptations. The first is bitterness: the wish to turn disillusionment into permanent contempt for existence. The second is counterfeit re-enchantment: the rush to fill the vacuum with any story that restores supervision. The disciplined path is harder. It allows the world to remain partially unanswered while refusing both despair and fabrication.

Practically, this posture requires exercises. End-of-day reflection can ask not whether one has pleased a hidden ruler, but whether one has responded well to the vulnerable. Mortality meditation can clarify priorities by stripping away fantasies of endless postponement. Periodic contemplation of cosmic scale can humble narcissism without collapsing dignity. Intentional gratitude can remain possible without becoming gratitude to a commander: one may be grateful for friendship, beauty, consciousness, weather after heat, music after grief, not because these prove providential governance, but because they are real goods in a finite life.

What stoicism adds to Omittoism is psychological durability. The argument against illegitimate cosmic sovereignty should not trap the subject in permanent lawsuit against reality. The point of the audit is clarity, not endless agitation. Once clarity is won, energy can be redirected toward construction, companionship, and the cultivation of an inner life no longer organized around appeasing unseen power.

The grace of the void lies precisely here. Emptiness, when honestly faced, can stop being merely negative. It can become the cleared space in which uncoerced value appears. Without a guaranteed script, choices matter more. Without promised cosmic rescue, care becomes urgent. Without supernatural surveillance, integrity becomes cleaner. One acts not to satisfy authority, but because this fragile interval of consciousness is all the more worthy of seriousness when nothing outside it automatically redeems neglect.

33. Art, Tragedy, and the Non-Political Sacred

One reason authoritarian theology persists is that it often shelters real experiences that are not themselves authoritarian at all. The experience of beauty, the ache of mortality, the sense that the world exceeds utility, the intuition that some acts are desecrations and some gestures luminous with significance—these experiences are frequently gathered under religion, and for good reason. They point beyond appetite. They interrupt self-enclosure. They teach that not everything valuable is chosen. A serious critique of divine rule should therefore say plainly what it is not criticizing.

It is not criticizing awe as such. Awe is among the healthiest human responses when proportion is restored between the self and what exceeds it. Nor is it criticizing lament, ritual, song, contemplation, silence, or the artistic transfiguration of grief. These can deepen life without subordinating conscience. Great art often performs a function once monopolized by theology: it lets finite beings encounter depth without requiring submission to a sovereign. Tragedy teaches seriousness without command. Music discloses order without legislation. Poetry can reveal the dignity and terror of existence while leaving the reader morally upright rather than politically conquered.

This matters because one of the false alternatives often offered in debates about religion is stark: either there is a divine ruler, or life is flattened into mechanism and appetite. But

between command and emptiness lies a large territory of existential richness. One can regard reality as worthy of reverence without treating it as a throne. One can regard suffering as sacred in the sense of morally inviolable without construing it as deserved. One can regard love as transcendent in importance without imagining it ratified by decree. The sacred, in this broader sense, names not ownership by another will but the depth at which certain goods and losses exceed ordinary calculation.

Indeed, the refusal of illegitimate authority may protect the sacred from one of its oldest corruptions: its conversion into an instrument of rule. When beauty becomes propaganda, when ritual becomes surveillance, when transcendence becomes a warrant for domination, something holy is not fulfilled but profaned. The distinction between the sacred and the sovereign is therefore not a secular diminishment. It is often a rescue. It allows reverence to survive without kneeling before force.

For many readers this note will not settle anything, nor is it meant to. It simply marks an important possibility. One may leave unquestioned divine rule behind and still remain answerable to wonder, to grief, to beauty, to the difficult dignity of others, and to the silence in which reality exceeds all our systems. The critique of sovereignty need not end in disenchantment. It may clear a space in which seriousness becomes freer, and reverence more honest, because neither is conscripted into obedience.

Part VI. Objections, Revision, and Final Reckoning

The closing movement tests the view against its best objections, states its own boundary conditions, and explains why the audit matters even under conditions where cosmic power cannot be externally constrained. It ends not with triumphalism but with a disciplined account of inner sovereignty.

34. The Strongest Objections

A framework that challenges divine authority must face the best objections available to it, not the weakest. Several stand out as especially serious.

The strongest objection to the present argument is not that it is impious, but that it may mistake the grammar of divine-human relation by overpoliticizing what is, at root, a relation of gift, participation, and final good. On this view, the creature is not confronted by a foreign sovereign imposing alien purposes, but invited into alignment with the very source of its intelligibility and flourishing. Consent, in the ordinary contractual sense, would then be the wrong model because no one first stands outside being in order to negotiate the terms of entrance. Likewise, hiddenness may not be administrative failure but a condition of spiritual freedom; punishment may not be externally imposed vengeance but the self-incurred consequence of refusing the good; and worship may not be servility but truthful

acknowledgment of reality. This objection deserves respect because it identifies a genuine danger in the jurisdictional framework: namely, that categories developed for finite institutions might flatten forms of dependence that are not straightforwardly political. Yet that danger does not rescue strong authority claims automatically. It only clarifies the burden of the reply. Theologians must still show why invitation remains meaningful under asymmetries of power and knowledge this vast, why refusal is genuinely uncoerced when ultimate stakes are infinite, why unequal revelation is compatible with justice, and why a relation described in devotional rather than political language should nevertheless retain the right to command, judge, and bind conscience.

The first is the arrogance objection. Who are finite beings to judge the source of all reality? Is not the very act of auditing God a form of metaphysical vanity? The answer is that the critique does not claim superiority over God in power, knowledge, or metaphysical status. It claims only that moral predicates used to praise divine rule must retain enough continuity with our moral concepts to permit evaluation. If "good," "just," and "loving" mean anything in theology, then the standards attached to them cannot be invoked only in one direction. Evaluation is not hubris; it is the price of meaningful praise.

The second is the futility objection. Even if divine rule were illegitimate, resistance would be irrational if the ruler could punish without limit. Prudence would favor submission. This objection exposes a real distinction between moral rightness and strategic survival. But prudence does not create legitimacy. One may prudently comply with a tyrant while denying the tyrant's right to rule. The framework defended here is about justification, not guaranteed safety. Its question is not "What should one do if faced with overwhelming power?" but "What follows about the status of that power?" To collapse the latter into the former is to let force define right.

The third is the dependence objection. Because creatures depend on God at every moment, they owe obedience in a way that political subjects do not owe obedience to states. But dependence, as argued earlier, is ambiguous. It may ground gratitude, trust, or prudential attention. It does not automatically ground jurisdiction. Indeed, radical dependence heightens the duty of care on the stronger party. It does not erase the standing of the weaker.

The fourth is the moral epistemology objection. If human beings are as limited and corrupt as the framework itself admits, how can they trust their moral criticism of divine rule? Perhaps what appears unjust is only the result of epistemic myopia. This objection has force and should produce caution. But generalized skepticism cuts both ways. If our faculties are too unreliable to criticize apparent injustice, they are also too unreliable to affirm apparent divine goodness with confidence. A skepticism broad enough to block protest is broad enough to block worship. Theological judgment cannot be protected by undermining judgment as such.

A sophisticated variant of this objection attempts to rescue the system by appealing to revelation: the theist concedes that human faculties are too limited to judge cosmic governance directly, but insists we are not left in the dark because the ruler has provided explicit self-disclosure. On this view, revelation serves as the epistemic bridge that our native

moral logic cannot build. We know the ruler is just, despite the terrifying appearance of the world, because the ruler has reliably spoken.

Yet this maneuver does not resolve the jurisdictional deficit; it merely translates it from a problem of moral epistemology into a problem of administrative opacity. The "bridge" of revelation must still be crossed using the very human faculties the theist just declared too broken to trust. If our minds are too corrupted to properly evaluate the ethics of preventable suffering, why should we assume they are perfectly calibrated to evaluate the historical, linguistic, and institutional authenticity of an ancient text or a localized prophecy? The vulnerability is simply relocated.

Furthermore, substituting contested historical documents for clear moral legibility fundamentally alters the fairness of the authority claim. If a ruler demands absolute obedience under threat of ultimate sanction, but places the justification for that rule inside a medium that is historically mediated, fiercely debated by rival traditions, and socially uneven in its distribution, the notice requirement of legitimate law has been violated. One cannot cure a deficit of moral legibility with a deficit of administrative clarity. To demand that the creature suppress its own ethical horror at the world in deference to an ambiguous textual inheritance is to demand the abdication of agency, not its perfection.

The objection can be pressed further than this, and it should be. Perhaps the finite creature is not merely limited but constitutionally unfit to audit the creator. Perhaps all creaturely judgments are provincial, framed from inside a tiny fragment of reality, blind to goods that can be seen only from the whole. Perhaps what appears to us as opacity, excess, silence, or cruelty would, from an omniscient standpoint, be recognized as necessary permission, proportion rightly scaled, or the hidden condition of a more comprehensive good. This is the strongest form of the fairness objection because it does not merely accuse the argument of arrogance; it accuses it of category incompetence. Yet even here the appeal to mystery cannot do all the work theology often asks of it.

The present framework does not claim omniscience. It does not claim the creature knows every relevant fact or can survey the total moral order of the cosmos. Its claim is more modest and therefore harder to dismiss: if a system addresses finite beings as morally responsible agents, then the standards of responsibility cannot be withdrawn the moment those beings ask whether the authority over them is justified. A ruler who binds conscience, demands worship, assigns guilt, and threatens sanction cannot answer criticism by saying that the very faculties used to understand justice are too weak to assess the authority making the demand. That maneuver erodes not only protest but praise. If our moral concepts are too fragile to register apparent injustice, they are also too fragile to ground confidence in apparent divine goodness. The issue, then, is not whether the creature knows enough to judge all possible divine reasons. The issue is whether total inscrutability is compatible with meaningful claims of justice at all.

Some opacity is compatible with legitimacy; complete asymmetry of intelligibility is not. In human life we do not require that the governed know everything their rulers know, but we do require enough intelligibility for obedience, blame, and sanction to be more than naked power. The same structural point applies more sharply in the theological case because the stakes are not lower but infinite. Epistemic humility is therefore necessary, but humility is not paralysis. To say "I may be wrong" is not to say "no evaluation is possible." To allow that reality may exceed our grasp is not to say that coercion, hiddenness, asymmetrical exposure, and disproportionate consequence lose all moral relevance when magnified. Indeed, if omnipotence or ultimacy could neutralize every criticism simply by outrunning the critic's comprehension, then legitimacy would disappear precisely where power becomes most absolute. That conclusion should alarm theology no less than philosophy. For what worship could remain morally serious if it rested on concepts too evacuated to distinguish holiness from domination? The creature does not need to know everything to know that reasons matter, that accountability matters, that opacity under ultimate stakes matters, and that force is not transfigured into right merely by becoming cosmic. Omniscience may exceed audit. It does not cancel the category of audit.

A fifth objection, and in some respects the most searching, comes from Paul Moser's *The Elusive God* (Cambridge, 2008). Moser argues that the demand for publicly accessible, propositionally clear evidence of divine authority fundamentally misconstrues the kind of knowing God seeks to produce in creatures. Divine hiddenness, on this account, is not administrative opacity but volitional pedagogy: God withholds spectacle-evidence precisely because such evidence would produce conformity without transformation. What God seeks is not mere intellectual assent but the reorientation of the *will* — a kind of knowing inseparable from the becoming of a certain kind of person. The demand for propositional clarity before moral response, on Moser's view, is itself a symptom of the problem divine hiddenness is designed to address. This is a genuinely sophisticated reply because it reframes hiddenness as a principled pedagogical choice rather than an administrative failure. The jurisdictional response must be equally precise: even granting the legitimacy of volitional pedagogy as a goal, the problem of *differential access* remains unresolved. Some persons are structurally better positioned — by birth, culture, psychological history, and education — to undergo the kind of moral-volitional transformation Moser describes. A system that attaches ultimate consequences to transformations many agents are structurally less able to achieve, without addressing those structural inequalities, has not escaped the fairness problem by relocating it from epistemology to the will.

The sixth is the existential consolation objection. Without divine authority, what becomes of ultimate justice? What becomes of the hope that the innocent will be vindicated and the cruel judged? This is perhaps the deepest objection because it reaches beyond logic into need. The answer must be honest. Without guaranteed divine jurisdiction, no final tribunal is secured by argument here. That loss is real. But the need for such a tribunal cannot, by itself, justify the authority of one who has not earned it. To desire a just ruler is not yet to have one. Integrity may require us to distinguish what we hunger for from what has been shown.

The seventh objection is eschatological. A critic might argue that the entire jurisdictional audit is conceptually premature because it demands justification in the middle of the historical process. What if, at the end of time, the ruler provides an accounting so total, and a remediation of suffering so complete, that every creature retroactively and freely endorses the history of their own exposure? If universal reconciliation combined with perfect divine explanation eventually generates uncoerced consent from all who suffered, does the system not finally vindicate its own legitimacy?

The framework's reply is strictly temporal: the promise of a future unveiling does not retroactively generate present political legitimacy. Jurisdictional critique evaluates the structure of the authority relation as it is imposed *now*. An authority that demands unconditional obedience, worship, and the surrender of conscience in the present, while explicitly deferring the justification for its harshest policies to an unverified afterlife, is functioning coercively in the present. Present opacity cannot be cured by drawing a promissory note on eternity.

In any human analogue, we recognize the moral hazard of deferred justification. If a terrestrial dictator demands absolute submission, strips subjects of their rights, and exposes them to profound harm while insisting, "You will understand and thank me in fifty years," we do not suspend our judgment of the regime's illegitimacy. The structure of justification must be accessible to the governed *during* the period of subjection. If infinite stakes are applied to finite lives under conditions of severe hiddenness today, a hypothetical future consensus does not erase the reality that the current demand for allegiance bypasses the consent constraint entirely.

An eighth objection returns us to theology. Suppose God is not a rival will but the deepest good of creatures themselves. Then refusing God would be like refusing one's own flourishing. The framework answers: if that is really so, then the relevant relation is not political sovereignty but teleological truth. The language of command and punishment should then be minimized in favor of healing, orientation, and understanding. Where traditions refuse that reduction and preserve the grammar of lordship, the legitimacy question revives.

The most formidable defense of this synthesis argues that what appears as political command is actually divine pedagogy. Because human beings are developmentally flawed, cognitively wounded, or fallen, they inevitably experience the objective laws of their own healing as external, coercive dictates. God is therefore not an arbitrary tyrant, but a supreme physician overriding a delirious patient. The sanctions attached to the law are not retributive punishments inflicted by a king, but the necessary therapeutic constraints required to prevent the creature from destroying its own nature.

The framework can readily concede that temporary, therapeutic coercion is sometimes a moral necessity. Parents restrict toddlers; surgeons bypass the immediate comfort of the patient to secure their long-term survival. However, legitimate therapeutic authority is defined strictly by its trajectory: it must aim at its own obsolescence. The goal of the

physician is to cure the patient so they may leave the hospital; the goal of the parent is to raise an adult who no longer needs to be commanded.

If a theological system posits a "pedagogy" in which the creature never graduates, never achieves parity, and is expected to remain in a posture of total, asymmetrical submission for eternity, then the therapeutic analogy breaks down. A therapy that requires the eternal legal minority of the patient has ceased to be a therapy; it has simply re-branded domination as care. If the ultimate end of the divine treatment is not the restoration of independent, competent agency, but rather an eternal kneeling before the physician, the relationship remains profoundly political, and the right to rule remains unearned.

A tenth objection attempts to turn the audit against itself by interrogating its normative foundations. By what right, the critic asks, does a biological accident audit the cosmos? If the "bio-social contract" proposed by Omittoism is merely an emergent survival mechanism of highly evolved, vulnerable primates, it possesses no transcendent normative force. Our aversion to suffering and our desire for reciprocity may be biologically useful, but they lack the objective, cosmic authority required to place the Creator of all reality on trial. To judge absolute being by the localized survival instincts of a single species is the ultimate act of philosophical vanity.

The answer to this charge is that the framework operates by immanent critique, not by claiming a rival omniscience. Omittoism does not need to assert that the bio-social contract is written into the fabric of the stars; it only needs to hold theology accountable to theology's own chosen vocabulary. When religious traditions demand our allegiance, they do so by invoking concepts like "justice," "love," "mercy," and "goodness." But these concepts derive their entire intelligible meaning from the human experience of shared vulnerability, care, and the prevention of cruelty.

If a divine ruler's "justice" or "love" shares absolutely no recognizable continuity with our earthly understanding of those terms—if it permits vast, preventable horrors and demands unchosen, absolute subjection—then the words have been hollowed out. Theology cannot borrow the emotional resonance of human morality to solicit our worship, only to discard the definitions of that morality the moment the ruler's actions are questioned. We are not asserting our supremacy over the cosmos; we are simply observing that if "divine goodness" means something entirely alien to our highest ethical logic, then the demand for our devotion is conceptually empty, reducing the call to worship to a mere demand for capitulation before overwhelming force.

These objections do not destroy the framework, but they discipline it. They prevent easy triumphalism. The argument is not that every form of religion collapses into tyranny, or that every believer is secretly authoritarian, or that secular reason floats above history unstained. The argument is narrower and sturdier: where authority is claimed, legitimacy must be shown; where it is not shown, refusal remains morally intelligible.

35. Boundary Conditions, Revision, and What Would Change the View

A philosophical framework gains credibility not only by what it affirms but by the conditions under which it would qualify, revise, or even abandon some of its conclusions. Jurisdictional sovereignty should therefore state its boundary conditions plainly. Otherwise it risks hardening into posture rather than argument. The central claim is that creation, power, and ontological superiority do not by themselves establish legitimate jurisdiction over rational agents. But what, if anything, could count as stronger evidence for such legitimacy?

The first and most obvious condition concerns consent. If a theological framework could show that rational agents are introduced into existence under conditions involving meaningful pre- or post-existence endorsement of the governing relation, the critique would be altered substantially. Suppose, for example, that persons somehow knowingly accepted the terms of embodiment before birth, or that they could later decline divine jurisdiction without self-destruction, catastrophic loss, or disproportionate sanction. In that case the birth problem would weaken dramatically. Much of the present argument depends on the conjunction of non-consensual entry and inescapable dependence. If either element changed, the structure would change with it.

A second condition concerns sanction. If divine authority were conceived without eternal punishment, irreversible ruin, or any comparably coercive threat, the appeal to freedom would gain force. A ruler who invited allegiance without weaponizing infinite stakes would stand in a different moral relation to subjects than one who attached cosmic catastrophe to refusal. Here again the framework is discriminating rather than absolute. It does not deny that persons may orient themselves toward an ultimate good. It denies that such orientation can be treated as a politically legitimate duty when refusal carries radically disproportionate cost.

A third condition concerns publicity and clarity. If the divine will were communicated with the kind of consistency, accessibility, and cross-cultural intelligibility one would expect from a perfectly competent universal governor, then the hiddenness objection would lose much of its administrative force. The present world, however, offers no such clarity. Revelation appears historically localized, textually mediated, institutionally contested, and psychologically uneven. A very different evidential situation would not automatically establish legitimacy, but it would remove one major reason for suspicion.

A fourth condition concerns accountability. This is the most difficult because classical theology often treats God as beyond evaluation. Yet the whole moral language of divine goodness presupposes some continuity with creaturely standards of appraisal. If there were a way in which divine governance could be shown to be publicly answerable—not merely asserted to be wise, but intelligibly just to the governed in a manner proportionate to their status as persons—then the jurisdictional challenge would be softened. The difficulty is that many theological responses solve the problem by intensifying mystery, and mystery purchased at the cost of evaluative access cannot ground legitimate rule.

The framework should also acknowledge its own limits. It does not prove that no God exists. It does not establish a complete secular metaethic. It does not claim that every religious life is servile or that every theological tradition is equally implicated in authoritarian structures. It leaves room for non-coercive religious visions, for devotional lives that do not make jurisdictional claims, and for metaphysical possibilities beyond current articulation. It is a critique of rule, not a total philosophy of reality.

There is another important limit. Some persons may freely, reflectively, and beautifully choose to place themselves under what they experience as divine authority. Jurisdictional sovereignty does not need to deny the sincerity or even the moral fruitfulness of such lives. It only denies that the fact of such choice settles the legitimacy question for all others. Individual devotion cannot by itself validate universal jurisdiction. At most it shows that under certain conditions some persons find the relation meaningful, illuminating, or redemptive. That may be an important existential datum. It is not yet a political proof.

What would count against the framework from the other side? One challenge would be a convincing argument that the very idea of authority here has been misdescribed—that divine-human relation is never, even in ordinary theology, genuinely political or juridical, and that terms like command, obedience, judgment, and punishment are all analogical in a way that makes the transfer of political standards inapplicable. But this challenge succeeds only if the theological tradition is willing to surrender much of the literal force with which those terms are commonly used. The more literally they are retained, the less the escape works.

Another challenge would be a compelling account of why rational agency itself necessarily includes an obligation of obedience to its source, not merely orientation toward truth or the good but genuine political subjection. To date, many traditions have assumed rather than demonstrated this bridge. The move from dependence to duty remains the weak hinge. If it were strengthened by argument rather than reverential assertion, the debate would change.

There is also a risk of overextension on the secular side. One might be tempted to turn jurisdictional sovereignty into a metaphysical individualism that denies all unchosen obligations. That would be a mistake. Human life includes many obligations that are not voluntarily assumed: duties to children, to the vulnerable, to truthfulness, to reciprocal fairness, and to institutions necessary for shared life. The framework does not deny that unchosen obligations exist. It targets a particular class of claims: comprehensive authority claims by one will over another will. The critique must remain disciplined if it is to remain strong.

Finally, the view is revisable in proportion to evidence and argument. If a future philosophical or religious development were to articulate a conception of divine authority satisfying the demands of consent, intelligibility, accountability, and non-coercive relation better than any current framework does, the jurisdictional verdict would need refinement. The point of the framework is not to immunize itself against surprise. It is to insist that

surprise, if it comes, must meet the standards ordinarily required when power asks for allegiance.

This final point is crucial because it marks the difference between principled refusal and reactive negation. Principled refusal is not the boast that nothing could ever justify authority. It is the insistence that authority must be justified. In that sense the framework belongs to the broader ethical history by which human beings learned to ask rulers for reasons, to distinguish office from force, and to refuse the sanctification of asymmetry merely because it is ancient, useful, or immense. If there is a future theology capable of answering that history without retreating into mystery or coercion, it will deserve serious engagement. Until then, the right to rule remains unearned.

36. Beyond Futility: Why the Audit Matters Even if Nothing Changes

A final objection presses with special emotional force. Suppose the analysis is sound. Suppose creation does not equal ownership, consent remains absent, hiddenness is severe, sanctions are disproportionate, and the authority claim is weak. What then? If there truly is a supreme power, our verdict does not alter its capacity. The audit seems impotent. Perhaps it offers intellectual satisfaction, but no practical change. Why undertake a philosophy whose conclusion, even if correct, cannot enforce itself against the scale of what it judges?

The objection mistakes the primary site of the argument. Omittoism is not first a strategy for externally restraining a cosmic sovereign; it is a discipline of internal jurisdiction. Its initial achievement is not to change the universe but to clarify the moral standing of the person within it. Human dignity includes the capacity to distinguish force from right even where force cannot be escaped. We already recognize this in political extremity. The prisoner may remain imprisoned. The dissident may fail to topple the regime. The victim may be unable to prevent the blow. Yet it still matters—morally, psychologically, historically—that domination is not inwardly ratified as legitimate simply because it is overwhelming.

This distinction between compliance and legitimation is the nerve of the framework. One may prudently conform, strategically adapt, or existentially endure while withholding the judgment that the ruler has the right to rule. Such withholding is not magical. It does not make one invulnerable. But it protects the last domain in which domination seeks completion: the interior conversion of the subject into a believer in their own subordination.

There is practical significance beyond the inner domain as well. Theologies shape law, family structure, education, gender norms, attitudes toward punishment, conceptions of guilt, and civic expectations about obedience. To audit divine authority is therefore indirectly to audit many human authorities that borrow their aura from it. Once people learn to separate causal greatness from moral title at the highest level, they become less susceptible to its terrestrial imitations. The argument matters because sacred models leak downward.

It also matters therapeutically. Many people suffer under inherited images of cosmic guilt, surveillance, debt, and unworthiness. Even when they no longer fully believe, they remain psychologically governed by structures they have never conceptually named. A rigorous framework can loosen this hold. It can show that one's discomfort was not mere arrogance, laziness, or rebellion against goodness, but often an undeveloped perception of a genuine legitimacy problem. Conceptual clarity can be a form of emancipation.

Furthermore, the audit matters because philosophy is not only instrumental. To see clearly is itself a human good. There is value in refusing flattering falsehoods, in resisting sacred intimidation, and in articulating the stakes of existence with honesty. Even if the universe remains unchanged, the species changes when it learns to ask better questions. Moral adulthood is not measured only by what it can control. It is measured by what it can face without surrendering judgment.

The objection also underestimates the constructive side of the view. Once legitimacy is no longer projected upward by default, responsibility thickens horizontally. We stop waiting for metaphysical authorization to build just institutions, repair harm, cultivate courage, or make mortality bearable for one another. Futility is often the name given by hierarchical worldviews to forms of action that do not seek permission. Omittoism replies that the refusal to sanctify domination is already a meaningful civilizational act, because it reorients where hope, duty, and dignity are to be found.

Finally, there is a matter of honesty. If one has concluded, after serious reflection, that an authority has not justified itself, then pretending otherwise for comfort or advantage carries its own cost. It fractures the self. The audit matters because integrity matters. To say, calmly and without theatrical hatred, that existence may be owed but obedience is not, is to preserve a truth about personhood that power cannot finally cancel. The universe may remain as it is. But the subject is no longer confused about what has and has not been earned.

37. Conclusion: The Authority Question After Theology

The inquiry that has guided this essay can now be stated in its most compact form. Theological discourse has often concentrated on whether God exists. The present argument has asked a different question: even if God exists, by what right would God rule? That question does not deny metaphysics. It disciplines it. It insists that existence, power, creativity, and even ontological ultimacy do not automatically generate legitimate jurisdiction over rational agents. Somewhere between "is" and "ought to obey" an argument is required. Much of religion presumes that argument has already been won. Jurisdictional sovereignty reopens the file.

What emerged from that reopening is not a single objection but a cumulative case. Creation is not ownership. Dependence is not political debt. Gratitude is not servitude. Hiddenness is not a neutral spiritual texture when authority claims are universal and sanctions grave. Suffering is not merely an abstract problem for God's existence but a

question about the justifiability of governance. The appeal to freedom falters when choice is structured by infinite stakes, radical asymmetry, and deep epistemic uncertainty. The most sophisticated theological models either soften divine rule into something less political, in which case the authority claim weakens, or preserve strong command, judgment, and sanction, in which case the ordinary standards of legitimacy return with force.

The force of the position lies partly in its ontological invariance. The argument does not depend on atheism. A demonstrated deity could still fail the legitimacy test. Nor does the argument depend on emotional hostility toward religion. Many religious lives are morally serious, beautiful, and intellectually refined. The issue is not whether devotion can be sincere. It is whether sincerity toward a power proves the power's right. History, psychology, and politics all warn against that inference.

What follows from the failure of unchosen sovereignty is not metaphysical emptiness, nor the adolescent fantasy of a self that owes nothing to anything beyond itself. It is a more demanding picture. The person released from illegitimate rule is not released from truth, finitude, vulnerability, mortality, or the claims of other persons. On the contrary, these claims become clearer once they are no longer obscured by the rhetoric of sacralized command. One may still stand in awe before existence, still feel gratitude for undeserved goods, still encounter mystery without mastery, still preserve ritual, mourning, reverence, love, and forms of disciplined self-transcendence. What disappears is not seriousness but exemption: no throne may claim my conscience simply because it is old, vast, creative, or feared. The mature moral posture is therefore neither worshipful dependence nor theatrical rebellion, but lucid adulthood—capable of reverence without servility, of critique without vanity, of solidarity without metaphysical guarantees. If a transcendent reality exists, it does not become dishonored by being asked for justification; if it cannot survive that question, then what fails is not piety but pretension. The deepest consequence of the audit is therefore inward before it is doctrinal: it restores to the person the right, and the burden, to remain morally awake before every power, including the highest one imaginable.

It is worth pausing on what a cumulative case means, and why it is philosophically stronger than any single argument could be. Each objection raised in the preceding chapters — the birth problem, the hiddenness problem, the proportionality problem, the competence problem — could, in principle, be answered in isolation. Theologians have developed sophisticated responses to each. Some forms of the hiddenness problem can be softened by emphasizing divine love over divine legislation. Some versions of the proportionality objection can be weakened by embracing universalism. Some forms of the birth problem can be addressed by appealing to eschatological consent. The jurisdictional critic should acknowledge this honestly. Piecemeal theological responses to piecemeal objections are often sophisticated and sometimes illuminating.

But a cumulative case works differently. It asks not whether each objection can be answered separately, but whether the total architecture of the authority claim survives the complete set of pressures simultaneously. A ruler who can explain away the hiddenness problem by appealing to volitional pedagogy still faces the consent problem. A ruler who softens the proportionality problem by embracing universalism still faces the competence problem posed by the structure of natural suffering. A ruler who defends sanctions by appealing to creaturely freedom still faces the question of whether the background conditions under which that freedom operates are sufficiently non-coercive to make compliance morally meaningful. When five or six conditions of legitimacy remain unmet simultaneously, the theological burden is not met by addressing any one of them with ingenuity. The architecture as a whole requires justification. That justification has not been provided.

This cumulative character also explains the structure of the essay's objection section. The strongest theological replies were addressed in sequence not to dismiss them rhetorically but to identify precisely which conditions they could meet and which they left unresolved. The Thomistic synthesis is the most sophisticated reply, and it receives the most extended treatment. It genuinely dissolves some forms of the authority problem — those that depend on conceiving God as a merely external will issuing arbitrary decrees. But it does so by moving divine normativity toward the constitutive end of the spectrum, and that movement creates its own philosophical cost: a constitutive divine normativity is no longer political sovereignty in the sense that commands obedience and threatens sanctions. If the Thomist genuinely accepts that cost, the jurisdictional framework has helped clarify what theology is and is not claiming. If the Thomist resists the cost and insists on preserving both the constitutive account and the political grammar of command, judgment, and punishment, the tension within the Thomistic synthesis becomes the problem, not a solution to it.

There is, however, a deeper significance. The authority question reveals something about what it means to take persons seriously. To treat rational beings as persons is to regard them not merely as loci of experience but as centers of judgment whose consent, understanding, and evaluative standing matter. The modern refusal of arbitrary rule was one expression of this recognition. It said that no throne is self-justifying, no inherited hierarchy above audit, no coercive structure beyond the question "by what right?" Jurisdictional sovereignty extends that discipline upward. It asks whether the largest conceivable sovereignty is exempt from the very standards that lesser sovereignties must meet. The answer offered here is no.

What is at stake in that refusal is not merely the theological question but the anthropological one. The two have always been entangled. How a civilization imagines the ultimate structure of moral authority shapes how it imagines persons — whether they are fundamentally subjects awaiting assignment, or fundamentally agents who both require and generate justification. The same development that produced constitutional government, the abolition of slavery, the recognition of women as full legal persons, the

slow dismantling of colonial rule, and the insistence that even the defeated enemy retains inviolable dignity — that entire civilizational development — was driven not only by new ideas about politics but by a new, if still contested and incomplete, understanding of what it means to be a person. Persons are not raw material. They are ends. And that means the authority claimed over them is answerable to them.

When theology insisted that divine authority required no such answerability — that the creator could not be measured against the created, that infinite sovereignty could not be audited by finite judgment — it was not merely making a metaphysical claim. It was, deliberately or not, making an anthropological one: that persons, however dignified in their created nature, remain permanently in the status of moral subjects whose first and final posture must be submission rather than evaluation. The jurisdictional framework rejects that anthropology without rejecting persons as creatures, as vulnerable, as dependent, or as limited. It insists only that limitation does not erase standing. A being who can suffer, reason, love, and judge has the standing to ask by what right it is governed. The smallness of the creature does not answer the question of the ruler's right. It intensifies it.

This does not leave human beings in a moral vacuum. On the contrary, it may leave them with a heavier responsibility. If no external authority can substitute for justification, then ethical life cannot be outsourced to command. Persons must reason, revise, listen, test institutions, protect one another from domination, and build forms of common life that acknowledge shared vulnerability without sanctifying power. Such work is harder than obedience understood as deference. It is also more faithful to the dignity of beings capable of asking not only what is commanded, but whether command is justified.

The weight of this responsibility should not be understated. The history of secular governance does not provide uncomplicated comfort. Regimes that have disavowed divine legitimacy have committed atrocities of a scale and systematicity that, for sheer bureaucratic horror, can exceed anything religious authority directly produced. The twentieth century in particular provides no warrant for the confidence that removing sacred authority from politics automatically humanizes it. Omittoism is not a celebration of that history. It is a discipline applied uniformly: wherever comprehensive authority over persons is claimed, by whatever vocabulary — divine right, racial destiny, historical necessity, national security, ideological purity — the same questions arise. By what right? Answerable to whom? On what terms? With what remedies? Those questions do not become easier to evade because the authority is secular. They become more, not less, urgent.

The heavier responsibility is therefore not simply the responsibility of building ethical life without divine warrant. It is the responsibility of maintaining the discipline of the authority question itself — keeping it alive in political institutions as stubbornly as this essay has kept it alive in theology. A civilization that learns to audit God and then exempts the state from the same audit has not advanced. It has merely transferred the

exemption. The species that learned to question sacred kings must also question the secular forms of authority that later claimed their own versions of unquestionable legitimacy. The jurisdictional framework is not anti-religious in any simple sense. It is a form of intellectual consistency: the insistence that power, wherever it arises and whatever dress it wears, does not become right simply by becoming overwhelming.

There is a temptation, when confronting ultimacy, to think that humility requires silence. Sometimes it does. Not every mystery can be solved, and not every limit should be denied. But there is another kind of humility, no less important: the humility that refuses to call force rightful merely because it is vast; the humility that distinguishes reverence from surrender; the humility that knows a creature may be finite without being morally null; the humility that accepts uncertainty without handing conscience over to whatever claims transcendence most loudly.

These two humilities are frequently confused, and the confusion is not innocent. The humility that bows before mystery is genuine and often right. Reality exceeds our conceptual grasp in ways that cannot be settled by philosophy alone. Consciousness, moral beauty, mathematical necessity, the sheer contingency of existence — these are not problems waiting for solutions but marks of genuine depth that responsible thought should honor without pretending to dissolve. The present essay does not mock that reverence. It has tried, consistently, to preserve it.

But the humility that bows before mystery must be distinguished from the humility that bows before whoever claims to represent mystery most authoritatively. These are not the same gesture. The former protects genuine openness to what exceeds our grasp. The latter hands the conscience over to institutions, traditions, and authority figures who have learned that mystery, invoked at the right moment, can silence precisely the questions that would most inconvenience them. There is a history of this invocation that is not flattering. The demand that finite creatures cease evaluating divine governance because they are too limited to judge — delivered most insistently at the moment when governance is most in need of evaluation — is not a counsel of intellectual humility. It is a political maneuver in theological dress.

The humility this essay advocates is therefore not the silence of the overwhelmed but the patience of the careful. It acknowledges limitation while refusing to mistake limitation for the absence of standing. It acknowledges that the cosmos may exceed any vocabulary we bring to it while refusing to allow that excess to be converted, without argument, into authority over conscience. It can say "I do not know" without also saying "therefore you may rule me without justification." Those are different sentences, and keeping them different is part of what mature philosophical life requires.

If some readers remain theists after this inquiry, nothing in the framework requires contempt for them. It asks only that they separate reverence from exemption, piety from authoritarian conclusion, and devotion from political self-evidence. This is not a small

request. Traditions are layered, and the authority claim is often so deeply woven into the texture of devotion that separating them feels like tearing. But the separation does not necessarily destroy what was worth preserving. A theology that gives up coercive jurisdiction — that no longer relies on eternal sanction to secure compliance, no longer treats hiddenness as an administrative convenience, no longer reads birth into a vulnerable mortal condition as tacit consent to comprehensive rule — may find that what remains is not impoverished but more honest. Reverence purified of fear is not weaker than reverence contaminated by it. It may be the only form of reverence that is genuinely worthy of its object.

For those who already stand outside religious frameworks, the argument offers a different service. It shows that the rejection of divine authority need not rest on the claim that God does not exist, which is epistemically demanding and philosophically contested. It can rest instead on the observation that the authority claim has not been justified, which is a more modest and more durable position. The agnostic who is not yet persuaded by either natural theology or the problem of evil may still have excellent reasons — drawn from the structure of consent, proportionality, and communicative fairness — to decline submission to divine jurisdiction as currently argued. The existence question and the legitimacy question are separate, and one may take a principled position on the second without having resolved the first.

For those suspended between belief and unbelief — a large population, larger perhaps than either confident camp acknowledges — the framework offers a different kind of clarification. Much of the moral discomfort felt by serious religious doubters is not, at its core, epistemological. It is not primarily the difficulty of believing in miracles or in the historical resurrection. It is the moral discomfort of a person who senses that the authority structure they have inherited does not answer to standards they can in good conscience endorse: that the relationship between the human and the divine as described by the tradition feels less like covenant than like coercion, less like love than like leverage, less like wisdom than like power presenting itself as wisdom. The jurisdictional framework gives that moral discomfort a precise philosophical form. It is not the discomfort of weak faith. In many cases it is the discomfort of strong moral intuition confronting an authority claim that has not yet earned its standing. Naming that discomfort accurately is not a small contribution.

If some readers remain unconvinced by the framework, the burden is clear: show where creation becomes title, where dependence becomes legitimate jurisdiction, where hiddenness becomes compatible with public moral accountability, where infinite stakes preserve free endorsement, where suffering remains answerable to the persons who bear it. Those are the terms of the dispute.

The burden is not discharged by pointing to the profundity of the mystery, the depth of the tradition, the sincerity of the faithful, or the consolation that divine rule provides. Mystery does not answer the notice requirement. Depth does not satisfy the consent

condition. Sincerity does not establish proportionality. Consolation does not replace justification. Each of these responses has its place in a different conversation — the conversation about whether religious life can be meaningful, or whether tradition deserves respect, or whether devotion is psychologically intelligible. But they do not address the specific normative question this essay has pressed. They change the subject. And changing the subject, however elegantly, does not close the file.

The burden is also not discharged by showing that secular alternatives face their own problems. They do. The bio-social contract is imperfect. Post-sovereign ethics is incomplete. Philosophical orphanhood is difficult to sustain emotionally. All of this is true, and the essay has tried to acknowledge it without minimizing it. But the imperfection of alternatives does not retroactively establish the legitimacy of the authority they replace. A broken compass is not vindicated because the stars are hard to read. The question is not whether secular ethics solves all its own problems. It is whether divine jurisdiction, as argued, meets the standards of legitimacy that any comprehensive authority claim over rational persons must meet. The evidence assembled here is that it does not.

And if others find in the argument not a denial of meaning but a recovery of moral adulthood, that too is intelligible. For there is a difference between living under reality and living under unquestioned rule. Mortality, finitude, truth, beauty, love, loss, and wonder may all claim us without thereby becoming sovereign in the legislative sense. One may bow before greatness without becoming property of the great. One may receive existence without surrendering the right to examine authority. One may remain open to transcendence while refusing illegitimate domination.

This distinction matters practically. To live under reality is to accept what cannot be changed while remaining active in what can: to acknowledge mortality without surrendering to despair, to recognize finitude without mistaking it for worthlessness, to accept contingency without abandoning seriousness. These are the recognitions that philosophy from the Stoics forward has learned to call wisdom. They require no sovereign. They ask only that one be present to the actual conditions of existence without flinching and without fabricating. That is difficult enough. It is also, in the deepest sense, sufficient.

To live under unquestioned rule is something different: it is to submit not only to what cannot be changed but to the interpretation of what cannot be changed provided by an authority that has not justified its right to interpret. It is to accept not only mortality but the meaning of mortality as delivered by a tradition or institution claiming divine warrant. It is to accept not only vulnerability but the specific moral conclusions someone else has drawn from vulnerability. The difference between these two postures is not visible in ordinary life, where they are thoroughly mixed. It becomes visible at precisely the moments when the authority claim is questioned — and the response is not argument

but condemnation of the questioner. A reality that tolerates serious examination is not the same as a sovereignty that forbids it.

The species that learned to audit kings may yet have to audit its gods. Not because the heavens are trivial, but because they matter too much to be left outside the discipline of justification. The oldest question may still be whether God exists. But after political modernity, after the long education of humanity in the dangers of sanctified power, another question can no longer be postponed. If there is a ruler above us, by what right does that ruler rule? Until that question is answered, obedience remains morally premature.

There is a final thought that does not quite fit the argumentative structure of the preceding chapters but that the conclusion is perhaps the right place to express. Philosophical adulthood, as described in this essay, can sound austere. The absence of cosmic custody, the refusal of infinite guarantees, the insistence on bearing justificatory burdens rather than inheriting authority's comfort — these can seem like a philosophy of subtraction, of loss. The inner republic described in the Coda is not a warm place, and it should not be falsely advertised as one.

But there is a form of warmth available in this posture that is different in kind from the warmth of divine protection, and in certain respects more durable. It is the warmth of shared finitude honestly faced: the recognition that the person beside you is navigating the same conditions of mortality, uncertainty, and unchosen exposure without any better cosmic guarantee than you have. That recognition can generate a form of solidarity that is not sentimental because it is not founded on illusion. You and I are not safe. We are not supervised. We are not moving toward a ratified conclusion. But we are here, in the same world, capable of helping and capable of harming, with nothing above us that has established its right to demand our allegiance, and therefore with everything between us that matters precisely because we can choose to make it matter.

Ethics, on this picture, does not rest on awe before divine command. It rests on attention to the person in front of you — their suffering, their dignity, their irreducible interiority, the specific ways in which your choices can make their situation better or worse. That attention requires no theological foundation. It requires only the combination of clear perception and the willingness to act consistently with what one perceives. Such willingness is rare and difficult. But it is not mysterious. It is the ordinary, unglamorous substance of moral life when stripped of cosmic scaffolding.

The authority question, pursued to its end, therefore returns the subject to the world rather than to the heavens. It clears a space in which persons face each other without the mediation of unchosen sovereignty — without the claim that some have divine warrant for what they demand of others, without the comfort that the unjust will be cosmically corrected so that present effort is optional, without the threat that nonconformity will be infinitely punished so that present compliance is coerced. In that cleared space, what

remains is not nothing. It is the world, and the people in it, and the fact that how one lives among them has real and irreversible consequences that no subsequent cosmic tribunal will undo.

If that is the conclusion of a philosophical adulthood, it is not a small conclusion. It does not promise elevation. But it offers something that elevated promises often obscure: the actual ground under one's feet, and the actual face of the other person, and the recognition that between those two facts — the ground and the face — the whole of moral life is already contained. The right to rule has not been established by anything above. The responsibility to act well has been established by everything around. That asymmetry is where serious ethical life begins.

38. Coda: The Inner Republic

The deepest claim of this work is not that the universe is ownerless, nor even that theology is mistaken in every form. It is that the right to rule cannot be smuggled into existence by grandeur. If there is a creator, that fact may deserve wonder. If there is a ground of being, it may deserve contemplation. If there is a sacred dimension to reality, it may deserve reverence. But none of these conclusions, singly or together, establish the legitimacy of command over conscience without further argument.

The mature human posture is therefore neither easy rebellion nor easy surrender. It is disciplined independence: the willingness to examine the highest claims with the same seriousness we now bring to earthly power, and the willingness to revise if better reasons appear. Such independence is not a declaration of self-sufficiency. We remain finite, dependent, mortal, and often confused. Yet within that condition there persists an irreducible faculty of judgment. It is the quiet republic of the mind: the place where force seeks recognition and may be denied it.

This inner republic is not solitary in the vulgar sense. It is sustained by dialogue, law, memory, friendship, art, and the long apprenticeship of thinking with others. It does not despise religion; it asks religion to answer for its authority. It does not worship skepticism; it asks skepticism to remain honest about its limits. It does not promise comfort. It promises only that no throne, however ancient or elevated, should be exempt from the question by what right.

Perhaps that question will unsettle inherited certainties. Perhaps it will clear a path toward new forms of reverence without domination. Perhaps it will simply teach us to become more careful, less credulous, and more responsible for the world immediately in front of us. That is already a considerable achievement. A species becomes more fully adult when it learns not merely to fear power, or flatter it, or mythologize it, but to assess it.

If Omittoism has a final moral image, it is not the insurgent storming heaven. It is the person who can stand beneath immensities without kneeling too quickly: capable of wonder, capable of grief, capable of ethical construction, and unwilling to confuse dependency with consent. That posture may not solve every metaphysical mystery. It does something harder. It keeps judgment alive where awe would prefer to silence it.

39. Afterword: Twenty-One Theses on Authority and Freedom

What follows is not a new argument but a compressed restatement of the whole inquiry in proposition form. The point is not to simplify the work into slogans, but to leave the reader with a set of sharpened claims that can be affirmed, rejected, or revised with clarity.

First: causal authorship is not identical with moral jurisdiction.

Second: the more a being is treated as a person, the less plausible proprietorial claims over that being become.

Third: birth cannot count as consent because no agent authorizes the conditions of entrance.

Fourth: dependence may justify care; it does not by itself justify permanent rule.

Fifth: if a ruler claims obedience, the ruler assumes a burden of intelligibility toward the ruled.

Sixth: hiddenness is not only a spiritual puzzle but an accountability problem when sanctions remain severe.

Seventh: ambiguity in revelation weakens the fairness of judgment wherever honest inquiry yields durable pluralism.

Eighth: asymmetry of power increases rather than decreases the burden of justification.

Ninth: proportionality is an indispensable criterion for evaluating punishment, including eschatological punishment.

Tenth: the possibility of greater goods does not automatically justify all imposed harms.

Eleventh: a world containing vast preventable suffering places a serious burden on any claim of perfect governance.

Twelfth: skeptical appeals to creaturely limitation cannot selectively protect only positive verdicts about divine goodness.

Thirteenth: if theology employs moral predicates such as justice, love, and mercy, those predicates must retain enough continuity with creaturely evaluative life to be meaningful.

Fourteenth: if the divine is construed in purely non-juridical terms, much of the present critique becomes a critique of sovereignty imagery rather than of transcendence as such.

Fifteenth: if the divine is construed as ruler, legislator, or judge, legitimacy questions become unavoidable.

Sixteenth: ethical life does not require divine legislation in order to become binding, because shared vulnerability and interdependence already generate publicly intelligible reasons for reciprocal norms.

Seventeenth: post-sovereign morality is not moral anarchy but moral adulthood.

Eighteenth: public institutions should not presume the legitimacy of any sacred authority that cannot be justified to citizens across deep disagreement.

Nineteenth: the human desire to kneel is psychologically understandable and politically dangerous when it sanctifies domination.

Twentieth: maturity requires the capacity to inherit meaning without surrendering judgment.

Twenty-first and finally: the highest achievement of a finite being may not be conquest, certainty, or consolation, but the preservation of lucid conscience before overwhelming power. To know the difference between force and right, even where force cannot be escaped, is already a form of freedom.

These theses do not close the matter. They indicate the structure of a stance. One may answer them with theology, with revision, with partial agreement, or with principled dissent. But the question they crystallize should not again be easy to evade. If there is any authority above us, by what right does it rule? And what would count as an answer worthy of persons asked to live, suffer, interpret, and die under its claim?

Transperancy mode: This article is the original intellectual derivation and sole philosophical expression of the author, Shamsaddin Amanov. While generative artificial intelligence (LLM models) was utilized as a technical scaffold for linguistic refinement and structural synthesis only, the conceptual architecture, Omittoist arguments, jurisdictional logic, and core philosophical framework remain the exclusive intellectual property of the author. Consequently, full responsibility for every claim, argument, error, and conclusion rests solely with the author.

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